

An Interview with Roger D. Duke about his co-edited book *Venture All for God: Piety in the Writings of John Bunyan*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011, 194 pp., paperback.

Interviewed by Brian G. Najapfour

Thank you so much for your willingness to be interviewed. As an admirer of John Bunyan, I am pleased to see a new book on Bunyan that especially highlights his spirituality.

Here are some of my questions for you about your co-edited work:

- 1. The book focuses on the piety of Bunyan. What do you exactly mean by the word *piety*, especially since the term is rarely used today? Is this term different from the word *spirituality*? Also, what is central to Bunyan's piety?**

Piety- We mean by piety, something very similar to the *Free Merriam-Webster* (online) *Dictionary* meanings: 1) The quality or state of being pious: a) fidelity to natural obligations (as to religions or God), b) dutifulness in religion, i.e. *devotion* to a religion or religious ideals, 2) an act of inspired by piety, 3) a conventional belief or standard such as orthodoxy.

Truly it is our belief that Bunyan was an orthodox Christian who was a totally devoted follower of our Lord Jesus Christ. One of the main purposes of our contribution to this Reformation Heritage Books series was the belief that Bunyan was one who demonstrated true piety towards God because of persecution in such a politically turbulent time. This is demonstrated by the extracted works in the second half of the volume.

Spirituality-Please allow me an anecdotal observation on this concept of *spirituality*. I have been in the classroom teaching World Religions for about fourteen years. There is spirituality in all of the major world religions. That is, there is a sense that most devotees have a sense of the "other" or the "divine" or a sense in which there is a spiritual realm or world beyond ours.

What I talk about in my classes, for I teach classes with person from all of the world religions in them, is that we are all spiritual. We have a sense that there is a higher and better in humanity than the animal kingdom. This entire discussion is "teased out" under the Image of God Christian concept. Then I bring to the discussion that we are all made intrinsically to worship. And that we all do worship something or someone. But generally the object of our affection ends up looking like us, or something that can be seen with the eyes, or fashioned with our hands, or can be held in our hands. There is a sense in which "spirituality" has seen a recent revival. But it is not a Christian spirituality. This small Bunyan contribution, we believe, speaks to that.

What is central to Bunyan's piety: Here I am speaking for myself alone. It seems to me that Bunyan was overwhelmingly concerned with being "right with God" and then "having an assurance" of that right standing with God. When one does just a cursory reading of his ***Grace Abounding*** this is so very easily seen. Secondly, the persecution of the non-conformist of his day put him in a position where he had to decide personally whether or not to pay the price for his convictions even to the point of spending years in imprisonment. This time of persecution defined and deepened, from my perspective, his deeply pious commitment to Christ and to preach his Gospel at whatever it might cost him.

2. **Without a shadow of doubt, you regard Bunyan as a Puritan. How would you respond to Richard Greaves, a noted Bunyan scholar, who argues that Bunyan "was, first of all, a sectary and not a Puritan"? See Greaves, *John Bunyan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969)*, 23.**

To Greaves's comment that Bunyan "was, first of all a sectary and not a Puritan," I might respond:

- a. He could possibly be creating a false dichotomy of "either/or" when it may have been for Bunyan a "both/and" scenario. When considering the Puritans they are very much like looking at a multi-faceted diamond. They have many perspectives. They are not monolithic. And it depends on whom is doing the looking as to what can be seen. They were, at some levels sectaries it seems, but with a greater religious and theological commitment that trumped the other.
- b. Bunyan, like many in church history, was one whose theology was in a state of flux. No doubt what he believed and taught at the first of his Christian trek may have been, in places, not fully formed as some of his more mature theological thinking. Many a theologian who is studied closely may have holes in their thinking, logic, or theological development when considered over their writing career.
- c. It must not be overlooked or taken for granted that it was because of his religious commitment (being Baptist and Puritan) that the secular (sectary) authorities put him away. So to say he was one, sectary or Puritan, in isolation of the other may be too simplistic and too much of a monolithic leap.

3. **Citing Gaius Davies, you state that Bunyan suffered from "a severe obsessive-compulsive disorder," which was contributive to Bunyan's long struggles for assurance of salvation (p. 17). Can you please tell us more about this disorder and its exact effects on Bunyan's spiritual life? Moreover, was Bunyan aware that he had this disorder?**

My dear colleague you do ask difficult but very interesting questions. As to your, "Can you please tell us more about this disorder and its exact effects on Bunyan's spiritual

life?" I cannot tell you about Bunyan's "disorder" as you have called it. Firstly, because I have not the credentials to be able to do so therefore I cannot offer an opinion. Secondly, because our dear brother is not here to defend himself or be interviewed by one from the latest "psychological school" it would only be speculation on our (my) part. But I can offer these observations:

- A. I am not convinced that Bunyan thought he had any type of mental disorder even by the standards of his day. These may be just a psychological description of one who was under such deep conviction of sin by God's Holy Spirit that it may have appeared (and to those who examine his writings today) that he had some sort of mental ailment. Those who examine Christians by any arbitrary "late model" psychological ramblings that are void of the understanding of what a convicted sinner's mind is like or how it works might mistake such as a mental derangement or disorder.
- B. The concepts of sin, Biblical guilt, theological as well as Biblical constructs that the "lost man" has going on in his mind do not often (if ever) fit into neat psychological "cubby holes" that can be analyzed with a backwards look in time.
- C. For the main, psychology is "man centered" and cannot necessarily understand Biblical concepts or categories. They seem to be juxtaposes at worse and contrasted to each other at best. One is "man centered," faith, repentance, and wanting to be right with God is "God centered." They do not always meet but sometimes can complement one another.

4. You indicate that Bunyan's sufferings shaped his piety significantly. In what ways did his sufferings considerably shape his piety? Also, what lessons can we learn from Bunyan's sufferings?

In what ways did his sufferings considerably shape his piety? Bunyan's piety was shaped by at least four circumstances;

- a. By his own inner tortured soul to know with certainty he was a secured believer,
- b. By the times of religious and political persecution in which he lived,
- c. By the times he spend in the Bedford "gaol,"
- d. By the times he was separated from his family, especially in the formative years of the lives of his young children.

All of these with other external issues of his time served to create an internal character that drove him to an ultimate dependence on his God, hence our title.

Also, what lessons can we learn from Bunyan's sufferings?

- a. Perseverance,
- b. Faithfulness under distress,
- c. Trust and focus in Christ,
- d. Love for God's Word,
- e. Prayerfulness,
- f. Making good out of the circumstances where we find ourselves

5. What projects are you currently working on?

Other Projects: I presently have three projects:

First I have a similar volume coming out on Dr. John Gill that is supposed to be released either late this year or sometime in 2013.

Secondly, I am co-editor with Dr. Richard Wells of Union University, on a volume of Aristotelian Rhetoric for Homiletics. Several well-known Southern Baptist preachers and homiliticians have signed on to do chapters in this work. We hope to have it done by the end of the summer 2012.

Thirdly, I am the General Editor of a festschrift that will be dedicated to a pioneer Southern Baptist Educator. Hopefully it can come together for publication by the end of the calendar year 2012 also.

Dr. Phil Newton, my co-editor and pastor, is working on his PhD at the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He will be approaching the dissertation stage in the next year or so as he finishes his coursework there.