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PAUL ROWNTREE CLIFFORD.

John Bunyan and "Reprobation Asserted"

IN AN interesting article "John Bunyan and the Authorship of *Reprobation Asserted*"¹ Professor R. L. Greaves argues that there is a strong likelihood that that work is not by Bunyan. He first surveys the external evidence regarding authorship and concludes that "it neither proves nor disproves his authorship".² Yet he does seem to say that the external evidence together with doctrinal differences to be discussed presently point away from Bunyan being the author. In this connection Professor Greaves is in some danger of overstating his case, as when he says, summing up his findings, that there is a distinct possibility that the treatise was written by an (unknown) open-membership, open-communication Particular Baptist. One cannot, without begging the question, argue that Jones is not guilty of an action for which he is *prima facie* responsible because the facts of the crime are consistent with an unknown person who looked like Jones having committed the crime!

Turning to internal matters Professor Greaves argues that the style of the work is not Bunyan's, although he allows that "only when Bunyan was directly embroiled in a theological controversy did he tend to omit somewhat his popular phraseology, his direct appeal to the audience, and his use of colourful metaphors".³ Such features are

certainly lacking in *Reprobation Asserted*, but then it could be argued that this is a controversial tract, not in the sense that the author is controverting the opinions of anyone in particular, but rather answering in general terms objections made by opponents of the doctrine.

While it is accurate to say that there are few metaphors and literary turns of phrase in the work, to the list that Professor Greaves gives could be added the interesting passage on "similitudes" in Chapter VI. "Similitudes never answer every way; if they be pertinent to that for which they are intended, it is enough; and to that it answereth well."⁴ It would not be strange if the man who wrote his greatest work "under the similitude of a dream" was also the author of this passage.

However, in arguing against Bunyan's authorship Professor Greaves places most weight on the doctrinal content of the work. He allows that overall the doctrine is "essentially harmonious"⁵ with Bunyan's views, but nevertheless finds several important differences, the chief of which is "the definite statement of a general atonement". This judgement involves the citing of several biblical texts and the following passage from Chapter IX:

"... the death of Christ did extend itself unto them [that is, the reprobate]: for the offer of the Gospel cannot, with God's allowance, be offered any further then the death of Jesus Christ doth go; because if that be taken away, there is indeed no Gospel nor Grace to be extended".⁶

It is on this passage, and the one longish paragraph from which it is taken, that I wish to concentrate attention. This is the only place in the work in which a general atonement is asserted, if indeed it is asserted here. Before considering this evidence in detail it is worth reflecting on the extraordinariness of the thesis that Professor Greaves is advancing. Here is a tract of twenty-odd thousand words manifestly defending the orthodox Calvinistic doctrine of the decrees of election and reprobation, in the middle of which come five hundred words of what is, from a Calvinistic standpoint, theological dynamite—general atonement! Yet there is no attempt to defend the insertion of such a view from the obvious theological objections that would spring to the mind of someone who took the Calvinistic view of the divine decrees with the seriousness and analytic power that the author of *Reprobation Asserted* does. In the work objections to the doctrine of reprobation are constantly and candidly faced. But apparently the doctrine of general atonement, which is (to say the least) in extreme tension with the Calvinistic view of the decrees of God, is slipped in without a word of apology.

Further, if things are as Professor Greaves suggests, if *Reprobation Asserted* is a tract that emphatically teaches the Calvinistic view of the decrees and the doctrine of a general atonement, this surely makes it a unique work. Where else at this period, and from this theological quarter, is there another such work, a work that argues *both* that from all eternity God has decreed to elect some of the fallen race to sal-

vation through Christ, and to pass over others who will be eternally condemned on account of their sin *and* that Christ's atonement was not for the elect but was general or indefinite in intent? If the tract is unique, not to say bizarre, at variance in an important respect with Bunyan's theology, yet published around 1674 in Bunyan's name, and probably by a publisher, George Larkin, who published other titles by Bunyan, why did Bunyan not later repudiate its teaching on the atonement?

However, let us leave such speculative questions and turn to some questions that are more readily answered. We shall look at two matters. Firstly, does the author of *Reprobation Asserted* teach the doctrine of limited atonement elsewhere in the work? If so, then we are faced with the prospect that the author contradicts himself. Confronted with such a possibility, and given the general Calvinistic tenor of the work as a whole, it is more likely that the overall intention of the author is to teach a doctrine of limited atonement, which is acknowledged on all sides to be more consonant with Calvinism, and that the disputed passage is to be interpreted in accordance with that intention. The second question is, does the author of *Reprobation Asserted* in fact teach the doctrine of a general atonement in the passage cited by Professor Greaves?

What is the doctrine of limited atonement? According to Bunyan it is Christ dying not for all men but for a certain number of men, for the elect. God the Father gave the Son "for a ransom by covenant for the souls of the saints".⁷ That is, the intention of Christ in dying was to atone for the sins of those whom the Father had given him, even though his death, abstractedly considered, was sufficient for every man if God the Father had chosen (and Christ intended) to redeem every man. In his *Come and Welcome* Bunyan expresses the doctrine in the following way:

"The gift, therefore, in the text [John v. 37], must not be taken in the largest sense, but even as the words will bear, to wit, for such a gift as he [Christ] accepteth, and promiseth to be an effectual means of eternal salvation to. 'All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out'. Mark! they shall come that are in special given to me; and they shall by no means be rejected. For this is the substance of the text. Those, therefore, intended as the gift in the text, are those that are given by covenant to the Son; those that in other places are called 'the elect', 'the chosen', 'the sheep' and 'the children of the promise', etc."⁸

Do we find such a doctrine in *Reprobation Asserted*? In Chapter V the author maintains that every human being is either elect or reprobate, and that the membership of each group is unalterable in particular because the number of the elect

"is confined to that limited number of persons that must amount to the complete making up the fulness of the mystical body of Christ . . . and hence it is that they are called his body and mem-

bers in particular . . . These are called Christ's substance, inheritance and lot; Ps. 16, and are said to be booked, marked and sealed with God's most excellent knowledge, approbation and liking 2 Ti. 2: 19".⁹

What the author is insisting on here is the closest possible identification of the elect with Christ. They are his substance, they make up the members of his body. It is true that nowhere in this passage does the author use the words "Christ died for the elect" and it is therefore abstractly possible that he intended to teach that Christ did not die for the elect but for all men indiscriminately. But it is improbable that the author held that the elect make up the body of Christ, that Christ regarded himself as having members made up of the elect, but that he did not die for the elect but for all the world indiscriminately. This position is hardly likely, given the general tenor of *Reprobation Asserted* and the analytical acumen of the author.

A second piece of evidence can be drawn from the first chapter. Here the author is arguing that there are reprobates from the fact that there is an election of grace.

"For this I say, though the children of the flesh, the *rest* besides the election, and the like, were not mentioned in the word; yet seeing there is such a thing as the children of the promise, the seed, the children of God, and the like, and that too under several other phrases, as predestinated, foreknown, chosen in Christ, and written in the book of life, and appointed unto life, with many others: I say seeing these things are thus apparent, it is without doubt, that there is such a thing as reprobation."¹⁰

Notice that the phraseology used for the elect is very similar to that used by Bunyan in *Come and Welcome* cited earlier. This is not just a stylistic point. The phraseology in *Come and Welcome* is explicitly linked with the doctrine of limited atonement. It seems not unreasonable that the same phraseology should indicate the same doctrinal position even though that doctrinal position is not stated *verbatim* in *Reprobation Asserted*.

But what of the disputed words themselves? Does the author intend by them to teach the doctrine of general atonement? It is of course necessary to distinguish between the words used, and the intention of the author in using them, as anyone familiar with these debates will acknowledge. All parties recognised that expressions such as "Christ died for the world", "Christ died for all men" occur in Scripture. The question was, what do such expressions mean? The fact that certain words occur was not regarded by itself as conclusive on the question of the extent of the atonement.

In the chapter in question (Ch. IX) the author is dealing with the problem of whether or not the gospel should be "tendered" (i.e. offered) to the reprobate, and he argues that it should be. He supports his argument with an inference from the fact that in the Bible those who do not receive Christ, when he is offered to them, are "censured". If they are additionally guilty as a result of refusing the offer, then the

offer must have been well-intentioned—that is, if they were to accept the offer of salvation, Christ's atonement would be sufficient to save them. It is in this sense, I suggest, that we should understand the words "it must needs be that the gospel was with all faithfulness to be tendered unto them; the which it could not be unless the death of Christ did extend itself unto them".¹¹ Christ's death extends itself to the reprobate in the sense that if they were to believe then Christ's death would suffice for their salvation.

In the second place it must be remembered that the author is at this point dealing with the practical question of what the preacher should say. His point is that the preacher should not say "Christ died for the elect" when preaching to the unconverted, because to do so would turn the hearers in the wrong direction. Instead of being called to Christ, they will be turned in upon themselves. "I, not knowing myself to be one of that number, am at a mighty plunge".¹² So although there is an election of grace, and only the elect will be saved by Christ, the preacher is not to call the elect to Christ *as the elect*. For if that is done then "I not knowing myself to be one of that number, dare not believe the gospel, that holds forth his blood to save me; nay, I think with safety may not, until I first do know I am elect of God, and appointed thereunto".¹³

This is precisely the point made by Bunyan in *The Jerusalem Sinner Saved*:

Objection. But I am afraid I am not (of the) elect, or chosen to salvation, though you called me fool a little before for so fearing.

Answer. Though election is, in order, before calling, as to God, yet the knowledge of calling must go before the belief of my election, as to myself. Wherefore, souls that doubt of the truth of their effectual calling, do but plunge themselves into a deeper labyrinth of confusion that concern themselves with their election; I mean, while they labour to know it before they prove their calling".¹⁴

(Notice, incidentally, that both the author of *Reprobation Asserted* and Bunyan think that someone who bothers about election before coming to Christ will be *plunged* into confusion. Is the use of the same word here just a coincidence?)

But let us suppose for the moment that Professor Greaves is correct, and that the work does teach a general atonement at this point. How would the doctrine of general atonement, given the author's views on election and reprobation, help to answer the question posed at the beginning of the chapter, "Whether God would indeed and in truth, that the gospel, with the grace thereof, should be tendered to those that yet he hath bound up under Eternal Reprobation?" That Christ died for men in general would only help if it was coupled with a *denial* of the doctrine of election and reprobation, but the author of *Reprobation Asserted* does not deny election, but steadfastly maintains it, and reprobation as its corollary. He only denies the irrelevance of (and the impossibility of) the *knowledge* that one is a member of the

elect prior to coming to Christ and in order to come confidently to Christ.

Finally, in insisting that the offer of the gospel is well-intentioned the author of *Reprobation Asserted* is not implying that the reprobate will ever come to Christ. Later on he explicitly denies that they will do so¹⁵ and later still makes the distinction between God being willing to save the reprobate and being resolved to save them.

"I say, as I have also said already, there is a great difference between his being willing to save them, through their complying with these his reasonable terms, and his being resolved to save them, whether they, as men, will close therewith, or no; so only he saveth the elect themselves, even 'according to the riches of his grace' Eph. 1:7."¹⁶

So, if the number of the reprobate is fixed, and none of them will ever come to Christ even though God is willing to receive them should they come, how would the doctrine of a general atonement help over the question of whether the gospel should be preached to the reprobate, or not? The doctrine of the general, well-intentioned offer of the gospel will help with that question, at least in the eyes of the author of *Reprobation Asserted*, and in Bunyan's eyes, but then that doctrine is consistent with both the orthodox Calvinistic doctrine of a limited atonement, and the doctrine of eternal election and reprobation.

Summing up, I have argued that to suppose that *Reprobation Asserted* teaches the doctrine of a general atonement is very unlikely, and that when examined it is found not to, and to be doctrinally consistent with Bunyan's works. Given such consistency, the fact that the work is ostensibly by him and was never disowned, and that it was probably issued by the publisher of certain of Bunyan's works, and that the differences in style between it and other writings of Bunyan can be accounted for by the nature and occasion of the work, it is more likely that *Reprobation Asserted* is by Bunyan than by anyone else.

NOTES

¹ *Baptist Quarterly*, vol. 21 (1965), pp. 126-31.

² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴ *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor (London, 1857) II, 343. All references to Bunyan's works are to this edition of his writings.

⁵ *Baptist Quarterly*, vol. 21 (1965), p. 129.

⁶ Bunyan, *Works*, II, 348.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 524.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 243.

⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 341.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 337.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, II, 348.

¹² *Ibid.*, II, 348.

¹³ *Ibid.*, II, 348. Compare Bunyan's approach to the unconverted in his *Instruction for the Ignorant*. 'Q. "Who is Jesus Christ that I might believe in him?" A. "He is the only begotten Son of God". Q. "Why must I believe on

him?" A. "Because he is the Saviour of the world". Q. "How is he the Saviour of the world?" A. "By the Father's designation and sending", (II, 683). Is this evidence that Bunyan was not the author of this work because it teaches a general atonement?

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 102.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 349.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 353.

PAUL HELM.

Reviews

Churches and Church-Goers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700 By R. Currie, A. Gilbert and L. Horsley. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977. 244 pp. £12.50.

This joint work represents an important attempt to apply statistical and sociological tools to the study of religion in Britain over the past two and a half centuries. The contents are equally divided between some thirty-four carefully assembled statistical tables and a 120-page essay which seeks to interpret their significance. Though the authors have done all within their powers to make sure that the statistics are soundly compiled, their assemblage ought not to be allowed to secure for them an authority beyond their due. It would be good if other scholars were to submit the figures here presented to close scrutiny both in terms of the validity of each series (e.g. the equation of baptisms with new church members in the Baptist series) and their comparability, especially since the figures relate to the whole of the British Isles (and here again readers of this journal will recognise that the Baptist series in recent years presents peculiar problems). These considerations are important, for any deductions from the figures must depend upon the reliability of the primary calculations.

These statistics are applied by the authors to a discussion of a particular view of church growth. They argue that the population of the British Isles has become disinclined to serious religious involvement "by the Reformation, by civic tolerance and secularization", and deduce, "In these conditions, churches cannot directly recruit a population already socialized but must engage in a religious socialization quite apart from, and prior to, their recruitment activities proper" (p. 7). Allied to this deduction is the distinction made between auto-genous and allogenuous growth, that is between growth from within the families of church members (what is elsewhere called biological growth) and growth from the wider population (conversion growth).