

John Bunyan's soteriology during his pre-prison period (1656–1659): Amyraldian or high-Calvinist?

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Abstract

Several historians and theologians have concluded that John Bunyan was a high-Calvinist. However, this conclusion has been challenged with the assertion that Bunyan held to a more mediate view of the atonement, often called Amyraldianism. This study seeks to evaluate Bunyan's place on the theological spectrum by evaluating his writings during his pre-prison ministry (1656–59). It sets forth the argument that, during this period, Bunyan demonstrated the Amyraldian penchant for combining real particularism with hypothetical universalism.

Introduction

When a survey is taken of references to John Bunyan, he is often categorised as a 'Calvinist'. However, upon closer examination, there is a debate about Bunyan's place on the theological spectrum within Reformed thought. Those who posit Bunyan as a full five-point (high) Calvinist include: Curtis Thomas,¹ Richard Greaves,² J. I. Packer³ and W. N. Kerr.⁴ In opposition to this position is the description of Bunyan as an 'Amyraldian' by Bruce Demarest⁵ and Curtis Daniel.⁶ Was Bunyan a high-Calvinist or did he hold to a more mediate position on the doctrines of salvation, often referred to as Amyraldianism? This study aims at developing an understanding of Bunyan's theology of salvation (soteriology) during his ministry before he was imprisoned (1656–59).⁷

¹ David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1963), 61.

² Richard Greaves, *John Bunyan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 36.

³ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 142.

⁴ W. N. Kerr, 'Bunyan, John', in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair Ferguson and David Wright (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), 117.

⁵ Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Downers Grove, IL: Crossway, 1997), 166.

⁶ Curtis Daniel, *The History and Theology of Calvinism* (Dallas, TX: Scholarly Reprints, 1993), 76.

⁷ Bunyan's life can be divided into three major periods: the pre-prison period (1656–59), the prison period (1660–71) and the post-prison period (1672–88).

The ongoing debate over the nature of John Calvin's theory of atonement exemplifies just how hard the historical-theological task of description and identification can be. There are many levels of context involved in understanding Bunyan's writings. These include the Reformation, England's society and culture, the books Bunyan read, the puritan preachers he may have heard, etc. While these aspects are all important, wider context must not exclude or overshadow the man himself. If these contexts are seen as concentric circles, this study aims at examining the circle in the centre, Bunyan's own writings. From the period 1656–59, Bunyan wrote a total of four works before he was put in prison for his non-conformist preaching. These are: *Some Gospel Truths Opened* (1656), *Vindication of Gospel Truths* (1657), *A Few Sighs from Hell* (1658) and *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded* (1659).

The pre-prison period context (1656–59)

In the later half of the 1650s the Quaker movement (the Religious Society of Friends) was growing in England.⁸ Around this time some individual Quakers began to meet in Bunyan's town of Bedford.⁹ Eventually Bunyan got into disagreements with them over an array of doctrinal issues. Bunyan's first venture into the realm of publishing revolved around his disputations with Quaker doctrine. The foundation of Bunyan's argument against the Quakers concerned their doctrine of salvation and how it was grounded in subjective experience rather than the objective truths of scripture and history.¹⁰ For this reason, Bunyan wrote directly on the offer and basis of the gospel.

Although Bunyan speaks directly to the issue of atonement and salvation in these works, diligence should be taken to consider the context of the argument. In this period, Bunyan was not primarily interested in the extent of the atonement as he battled Quakers and Ranters; he never mentioned Moise Amyraut (1596–1664), or John Davenant (1576–1641), or any other theologian associated with Amyraldianism. He was more interested in a response to the Quakers that would articulate the need for Christ to have been crucified and resurrected in time-space-history rather than in a mere experience of the heart.

⁸ J. A. Punshon, 'Quaker Theology', in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: IVP, 2000), 553.

⁹ John Brown, *John Bunyan: His Life, Times, and Work* (London: The Hulbert Publishing Co., 1885), 112.

¹⁰ Galen Johnson, 'Prisoner of Conscience: John Bunyan on Subjectivism, Individualism, and Christian Faith' (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2002), 15.

Soteriology

Generally Calvinistic

Generally speaking, Bunyan was Calvinistic in his theology. He held to the central Calvinistic tenet: God saves. There is no evidence of any synergistic involvement of man's will in salvation. In *The Doctrine of Law and Grace Unfolded*, he wrote that men will not seek Christ,¹¹ and that they are an enemy to God, Christ and salvation.¹² There is no evidence that Bunyan's theory of atonement was influenced in anyway by the Grotian governmental theory of Hugo Grotius (1583–1645). Bunyan speaks of Christ's death being a propitiation¹³ and a sacrifice to an offended God, not a mere governmental act.¹⁴ While Bunyan clearly falls under the general term 'Calvinistic', it is not clear where he falls on the theological spectrum.

God's love and lapsarian controversy

A strong position of supralapsarianism would make it very difficult to hold the Amyraldian tenet that God's loves all people (albeit in different ways or degrees). It would take a great deal of explanation to demonstrate that those who are created by God specifically for sin and damnation are loved at all. Even if it is granted that God may give common grace to those elected for damnation, the love that Amyraldianism asserts is deeper than this. There are two emphases related to predestination and the lapsarian controversies¹⁵ that appear in Bunyan's writings during this period: (1) God's loving nature and (2) recognition of the causal principle.

Bunyan's understanding of God's loving nature is at times complex. In *The Law and Grace Unfolded*, there is an unequivocal statement that 'God himself' is love and his love towards the elect is 'everlasting love'.¹⁶ But shortly after he made this assertion, he raised the objection: 'But how cometh it to pass then, that many fall off again from the grace of the gospel, after a profession of it for some time; some to delusions, and some to their

¹¹ John Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor, vol. II, 1854 reprint (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 521.

¹² Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 521.

¹³ John Bunyan, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor, vol. I, 1854 reprint (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 171.

¹⁴ Scott Tatum's analysis of Bunyan's atonement theory concurs that it was to 'satisfy the justice of God and pay the debt which man owed'. See Scott Tatum, 'The Theology of John Bunyan', ThD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1949, 189.

¹⁵ The lapsarian controversies revolved around the order of God's eternal decrees. Specifically, the priority and cause of damnation were most controversial.

¹⁶ Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 539.

open sins again?’¹⁷ His answer to this question belies the complexity of his understanding of God’s love. His reply was, ‘They are all fallen away, not from the everlasting love of God to them, but from the profession of the love of God to them’.¹⁸ The reason that sinners are ‘fallen away’ is attributed not directly to a supralapsarian decree, but to their own profession. The next pericope stated, ‘Therefore they that do finally fall away from a profession of the grace of the gospel, it is, first, because they are bastards, and not sons, not of the household of God’.¹⁹ The falling away unto damnation is attributed not to a lack of love of God for the sinner, but to their state as ‘bastards’. In other words, the problem of love lies not with God, but with the sinner. Stronger evidence of a view of God’s decree of predestination that is compatible with Amyraldianism or infra/sublapsarianism appears in the following objection addressed. This objection is framed, ‘But the Scripture saith that there are some that had faith, yet lost it, and have made shipwreck of it.’ The reply is given:

Now God loves no longer than they believe, as is evident; for ‘he that believeth not shall be damned’. So then, if some may have faith, and yet lose it, and so lose the love of God because they have lost their faith, it is evident that God’s love is not so immutable as you say it is to everyone that believeth.²⁰

Again, the reason for losing the love of God is that the sinner has rejected God. However, the implication here seems to be that it is possible for God to love a sinner, albeit not in an effectual way that produces salvation; it is in a sense conditional. The lack of God’s love is attributable to the sinner’s action, not to the decree of God.

Furthermore, the conditionality of God’s love in this pericope is evidence of a covenant structure which will be examined later. Though Bunyan asserts the existence of a conditional love of God, he later anticipates objections and provides clarification for his position: ‘As to the second clause of the objection, which runs to this effect, God loves men upon the account of their believing, I answer, that God loves men before they believe; he loves them, he calls them, and gives them faith to believe’.²¹ The love of God is not only an integral part of the hidden will of God (why people fall away); it is also an integral part of the gospel message. Though Bunyan does not repeat to the

¹⁷ Ibid., 539.

¹⁸ Ibid., 539.

¹⁹ Ibid., 539.

²⁰ Ibid., 539.

²¹ Ibid., 540.

sinner, 'God loves you' *ad nauseum*, it is a crucial issue. Bunyan's exposition of Luke 16 encourages sinners to consider the agony of hell as rejecting God's love for them: 'Remember that the reason why thou didst lose thy soul, was because thou didst not close in with free grace, and the tenders of a loving and free-hearted Jesus Christ'.²² In *The Law and Grace Unfolded*, he urged the reader to consider the following: 'Not only so, but also when he [Christ] came, he came all on a gore blood to proffer mercy to thee, to show thee still how dearly he did love thee; as if he had said, Sinner, here is mercy for thee'.²³ As Bunyan addresses unbelievers, he wants them to see God's love for them in the cross. Thus, God's love is not mystical, but bound to its highest demonstration in the cross.²⁴

Thus far we have seen evidence that Bunyan's view of God's love is manifold. First, God's nature is loving, yet there are both conditional and unconditional aspects to his relationship with man. Secondly, provision is made for God to love all men. Thirdly, this provision of love is to be viewed as manifest in Christ. The unbelieving sinner is to look to the cross of Christ to see the love of God for him.

The idea that God's love was 'lost' if a person did not believe is evidence that Bunyan incorporated a causal principle in his doctrine of predestination. While his allowance for a universal love of God seems to prevent a doctrine of supralapsarianism, he makes further comments about the nature of the fall that point to at least a compatibility with infra/sublapsarianism or Amyraldianism. A clear statement is made in the opening section of *Some Gospel Truths Opened*: 'That is, God seeing that we would transgress, and break his commandment, did before choose some of those that would fall'.²⁵ In the same context he writes, 'God having thus purposed in himself, that he would save some of them that by transgression had destroyed themselves'.²⁶

Both these sections clearly view God as electing for salvation out of those who had already fallen. Predestination for Bunyan involves the causal principle in some way as opposed to a supralapsarian teleological principal. The damnation of man is *caused* not merely by predestination alone but by the Adamic fall and people's own sin.

²² John Bunyan, *A Few Sighs From Hell*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor, vol. III, 1854 reprint (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 690.

²³ Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 523.

²⁴ Further evidence is in this statement: 'As for your part, you did neglect the precious mercy and goodness of God . . . to close in with the loving kindness of the Lord, his Son Jesus Christ'. Bunyan, *A Few Sighs from Hell*, 692–3, cf. 692, 702, 708, 709.

²⁵ Bunyan, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, 141.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

Support for the causal principle can also be seen in *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*. When Bunyan speaks of ‘reprobates’, he is careful to couch his language in terms not of a decree of God but of unbelief. He states, ‘we say plainly, some have not the Spirit of Christ in them, and they are reprobates, according to the scripture, Ro.viii.9’.²⁷ Again he writes, ‘They are indeed reprobates who have not Christ manifest with them’.²⁸ Attribution of damnation to the fall is similar to statements made in *Some Gospel Truths Opened*. To answer why people are ‘carried away with such heresies’, Bunyan replies, ‘he [God] doth preserve some to eternal life, though others fall into eternal damnation’.²⁹ Bunyan’s Calvinistic view of God’s sovereignty does appear to support a more teleological principle (God predestinating for certain ends) in one passage in *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*:

And whereas thou askest, whether the fault be then in God, or in that thou callest his light, or in the creature? I answer; What if God willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much patience the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction; and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore (before the world was, Ep.i.4) ordained unto glory? And secondly, O vain man! What is that to thee if God should make some vessels to dishonour: hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to do therewith as he pleases. Ro.ix.16–22.³⁰

But even in this occasion, Bunyan primarily refers to scripture; there is no extrapolation on means or ordination or decrees. What is clear is that Bunyan is operating not from a system, *per se*, but from the dominant themes as he understands them in scripture. Bunyan has no simplistic view of God’s love and he appears to move away from the possibility of supralapsarianism. Perhaps more important is that predestination is not a central doctrine that guides the rest of his soteriology during this period. While Bruce Demarest cites later works of Bunyan (e.g. *Reprobation Asserted*) in support of placing him under the superscription of ‘Double Unconditional Predestination (High Calvinists)’,³¹ the works of the pre-prison period point towards the opposite end of the theological spectrum.

²⁷ Bunyan, *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*, 182.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 213.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

³¹ Bruce Demarest specifically places Bunyan with the high-Calvinists who reject the ‘thesis of permission’ or the causal principal. See Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 107–10.

Sufficiency and possibility

The infamous formula that provided theological middle ground on the extent of the atonement had been around for some time, even for Bunyan. The formula stated: Christ's death was sufficient for all, but efficient only for the elect.³² While the formula never appeared in full, there is evidence that Bunyan considered these two categories. To find some evidence of these categories should not be surprising because it had been influential in Calvinistic thought for some time. Though Bunyan makes clear references to sufficiency, he does not contrast it with efficiency. In *Some Gospel Truths Opened* he states, 'When he [the Holy Spirit] is come he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness too. Jn.xvi.8. That is, the Spirit shall convince men and women of the sufficiency of that righteousness that Christ, in his human nature, hath fulfilled'.³³

There is more 'sufficiency' language in *The Doctrine of Law and Grace Unfolded*: 'Shall I honour the blood of thy Son also by despairing that the virtue thereof is not sufficient, or by believing that it is sufficient to purge me from all my blood-red and crimson sins?'³⁴ Yet again, this is not contrasted against the concept of efficiency or particularity in the context. Also in the same work a connection is drawn by Bunyan between the sufficiency of Christ's death and the ability to present a sincere gospel offer to all men. Bunyan avers,

I say it was not the greatness of the sins of these sinners; no, nor of an innumerable company of others, that made God at all to object against the salvation of their souls, which justice would have constrained him to had he not had satisfaction sufficient by the blood of the Lord Jesus.³⁵

Bunyan continues, founding the gospel offer upon this sufficiency:

Nay, further, I do find that because God the Father would not have the merits of his Son to be undervalued, I say, he doth therefore freely by his consent let mercy be proffered to the greatest sinners – in the first place, for the Jews, that were the worst of men in that day for blasphemy against the gospel.³⁶

³² G. Michael Thomas cited this formula as appearing in the twelfth century by Peter Lombard. See G. Michael Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 5.

³³ Bunyan, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, 154.

³⁴ Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 562–3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 536.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 536.

Here, the free and genuine offer of the gospel rests wholly on the sufficiency (value) of Christ's blood. Even though Bunyan does not specifically use the sufficient versus efficient formula, he uses sufficiency in an Amyraldian way.

The divine intention to provide sufficiently for all in the atonement also becomes the basis for truly making salvation possible for all. That the cross made salvation possible is clear in this instance:

The end of my speaking of this is to show you that it is not wisdom now to doubt whether God will save you or no, but to believe, because all things are finished as to our justification: the covenant not only made, but also sealed; the debt paid, the prison doors flung off the hooks, with a proclamation from heaven of deliverance to the prisoners of hope, saying, 'Turn you to the stronghold, ye prisoners of hope, even to-day do I declare,' saith God, 'that I will render double unto thee'. Zec.ix.12.³⁷

Christ is seen as a 'distributor' of all that he has purchased. He is the 'principal man for the distributing of the things made mention of in the new covenant, he having them all in his own custody by right of purchase; for he hath bought them all, paid for them all'.³⁸ Again, in *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded* he avers:

Thus I have showed you in particular, that the covenant of the grace of God is free and unchangeable to men – that is, in that it hath been obtained for men, and that perfectly, to the satisfying of justice, and taking all things out of the way that were any ways a hindrance to our salvation. Col.ii.14.³⁹

In other words, Bunyan deeply divides accomplishment and application. Thus, faith, the Holy Spirit, wisdom, grace, a new heart, strength against temptations, and the ability to be more than a conqueror are freely available from Christ.⁴⁰ Against the high-Calvinistic position that views the cross as a victory without loss, the efficiency of the cross is not applicable until belief.

Appropriation

Because Christ's death is sufficient for all men, a gospel message may genuinely be offered to all men who are exhorted to appropriate or 'lay hold of' Christ for themselves. This concept of appropriation builds off of the universal value and sufficiency of Christ's death.

³⁷ Ibid., 565.

³⁸ Ibid., 565. Also see his comment regarding satisfaction in *A Few Sighs from Hell*, 709.

³⁹ Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 537–8.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 565.

The decisive work of the Holy Spirit is giving the saving faith which grasps Christ in this appropriating way. God works in the sinner through the conscience to make him know that his sins against the law are sins against God.⁴¹ Showing the impact that Luther's theology had upon him, he maintains that the law must do its work before the Gospel.⁴² Then, God's usual way to communicate his Spirit into the hearts of the elect was through preaching.⁴³ The Spirit is needed first to know the truths of the gospel.⁴⁴ Through the preaching of gospel, Christ gave the Holy Spirit and the gift of 'true faith'.⁴⁵

This living and true faith appropriated Christ and the sufficiency of his merit and virtue to the sinner. The 'living faith' grasps the love of God in Christ, 'hold forth the merits of my Son's birth . . . with all my love in him, and proffer it to them'.⁴⁶ Bunyan defined 'living by faith' in *Some Gospel Truths Opened* as:

Which living by faith, is to apply the Lord Jesus Christ his benefits, as birth, righteousness, death, blood, resurrection, ascension, and intercession, with the glorious benefits of his second coming to me, as mine, being given to me, and for me, and thus much doth the Apostle signify, saying; 'The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me'. Gal.ii.20.⁴⁷

The unconverted sinner who is unregenerate is to assume by faith that Christ's blood is for him or herself. A further 'admonition' in *Some Gospel Truths Opened* echoes the same:

In a word, you that have not yet laid hold on the Lord Jesus Christ, for eternal life, lay hold upon him; upon his righteousness, blood, resurrection, ascension, intercession, and wait for his second coming to 'judge the world in righteousness'. Ac.xvii.31.⁴⁸

A similar description of the gospel is made in *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*:

And if at any time there be the doctrine of Jesus held forth in truth, his death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and intercession; now without in

⁴¹ Bunyan, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, 151.

⁴² Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 494.

⁴³ Bunyan, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, 152.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁴⁶ Bunyan, *A Few Sighs from Hell*, 687.

⁴⁷ Bunyan, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, 147.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 169. See a similar comment in a catechism format on 170.

the presence of his Father for sinners, and that there is salvation nowhere else but in the merits of the firstborn of Mary, which is Jesus Christ, without the works of the law, Ro.iii.28.⁴⁹

The same admonition that the sinner should claim the blood as his or her own is also in *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*:

Reckon thyself, therefore, I say, the biggest sinner in the world, and be persuaded that there is none worse than thyself; then let the guilt of it seize on thy heart, then also go in that case and condition to Jesus Christ, and plunge thyself into his merits and the virtue of his blood.⁵⁰

This appropriation is to continue throughout the life of the Christian. Under the heading 'Comfortable considerations from Christ's intercession' in *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, Bunyan considers the antidote against the accusations of the devil:

In case the devil should aspire up into the presence of God, to accuse any of the poor saints, and to plead their backslidings against them, as he will do if he can, then there is Jesus, our Lord Jesus, ready in the court of heaven, at the right hand of God, to plead the virtue of his blood, not only for the great and general satisfaction that he did give when he was on the cross, but also the virtue that is in it now for the cleansing and fresh purging of his poor saints under their several temptations and infirmities.⁵¹

What is most glaring in Bunyan's doctrine of appropriation is that he strongly maintains that it is both the past sacrifice of Christ and the present intercession of Christ that must be gained. His works all aver that the sinner must consider that Christ's death was for him or herself and lay hold of what Christ 'hath done and is doing in his own person for sinners'.⁵²

Assurance

The true faith that appropriates or lays hold of Christ plays a central role in Bunyan's understanding of assurance. This doctrine is significant because of Bunyan's exposition of the Calvinistic doctrine of unconditional election (the U in TULIP). While Bunyan never made election a central doctrine in

⁴⁹ Bunyan, *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*, 213.

⁵⁰ Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 494.

⁵¹ Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 532.

⁵² Bunyan, *A Few Sighs from Hell*, 681.

any of his works of this period, he does not shy away from the topic.⁵³ Even in his highly evangelistic work *A Few Sighs from Hell*, election is mentioned a couple of times. The pertinent question to answer for the Calvinist, then, is: am I a member of the elect? Roger Sharrock, for example, answered that for Bunyan, assurance of election came from a life of disciplined and intellectual 'moral effort' that resulted in the 'discovery' of assurance.⁵⁴ However, during this period, Bunyan bases assurance not upon introspection or investigation, but upon the essence of faith.

As was noted before, the unregenerate sinner could be assured of God's love for him or herself by looking to the cross. This was an expression of God's justice in Christ's death and his love towards the sinner. This aspect of God's love is seen as continuous with God's dealings with OT believers in these passages: 'Now the first discovery that was made to a lost creature of the love of God was made to fallen Adam. Ge.iii.15'; 'Another discovery of the love of God in the gospel, was held forth to Noah'; 'God breaks out with a farther discovery of himself in love to that generation in which Abraham lived'.⁵⁵

Bunyan viewed the Gospel message as a message of love held out to the sinner. The assured faith is a living faith, given by the Spirit, that is appropriating Christ's blood and intercession. That assurance is the essence of faith, and not the product of intellectual and moral wrestling (contra Sharrock) is clear from this statement in *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*:

Now, Friend, faith is that which layeth hold of, or believeth the gospel. And that this is the meaning read the next verse: That (saith he) 'If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved'. So that it is clear that the word of faith, is to believe assuredly from the very heart, that God hath raised up Jesus from the dead, out of the grave into which he was laid by Joseph.⁵⁶

This doctrine of assurance is further explained in *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded* as Bunyan refutes the overemphasis given by Quakers to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. To this overemphasis, he avers:

⁵³ Bunyan, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, 152, 168, 169; *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*, 212; *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 532.

⁵⁴ Roger Sharrock, *John Bunyan* (London: Hutchinson House, 1954), 16.

⁵⁵ Bunyan, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, 143.

⁵⁶ Bunyan, *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*, 196. That assurance is the essence of faith is maintained in *A Few Sighs from Hell*. See Bunyan, *A Few Sighs from Hell*, 693.

This is now a wrong faith, as is evident, in that it is placed upon a wrong object; for mark, this faith is not placed assuredly on God's grace alone, through the blood and merits of Christ being discovered effectually to the soul, but upon God through those that God hath given it, as of gifts, either to preach, or pray, or do great works, or the like, which will assuredly come to nought as sure as God is in heaven, if no better faith and ground of faith be found out for thy soul savingly to rest upon.⁵⁷

The ground of confidence and assurance must not be gifts or abilities but faith, which is given by the 'glorious operation of the Spirit'.⁵⁸

As Bunyan stresses the need for internal or subjective considerations, persuasions and convictions, he clearly anticipates objections. Such anticipation is found in his explanation of the ground or basis of salvation:

That man's belief that is grounded upon anything done in him, or by him only, that man's belief is not grounded upon the death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and intercession of Jesus Christ; for that man hath indeed good ground of his eternal salvation, his faith is settled upon that object which God is well pleased or satisfied withal, which is that man that was born of Mary, even her first-born Son – that is, he doth, apply by faith to his soul the virtues of his death, blood, righteousness, etc., and doth look for satisfaction of soul nowhere else than from that.⁵⁹

As he continues his explanation, he asserts that to find the ground of salvation in anything subjective would place assurance in jeopardy: 'because his confidence is not grounded upon the Saviour of sinners, but upon his turning from gross sins to a more refined life, – and it may be to the performance of some good duties – which is no saviour'.⁶⁰

Clearly works are secondary in assurance and the objective sacrifice of Christ must be appropriated by the sinner. The atonement provides the basis for the call to go forth that Christ is willing to accept all and that sinners must appropriate his 'virtues' themselves by faith. Bunyan does not view election as a doctrine that forces one to wrestle through soul searching and pursuits of evidence. Election for Bunyan is similar to that of Moise Amyraut; it is the *ex post facto* explanation of conversion.⁶¹ Thus, it is sufficient to say that Sharrock's assertions regarding assurance and election do not apply at all to Bunyan during this early pre-prison period.

⁵⁷ Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 540.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 540.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 514.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 514.

⁶¹ Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement*, 21.

Particularity and Universality

All of John Bunyan's soteriology during this period contains two parallel threads: particularity and universality. These two concurrent themes come out clearly as Bunyan describes both God's will and God's accomplishments. While Bunyan's attempt to reconcile these issues is minimal,⁶² he does describe the intercessory work of Christ as the touchstone for understanding these two themes.

Bunyan was not a systematic theologian in the formal sense, having little education and no official ministry training. So there is little surprise that he spent minimal effort creating a grand theory that would reconcile what appear to be two wills in God: a particular will and a universal will.

Though he allowed for no Arminian or Semi-pelagian synergistic theories of salvation, there is an emphasis on a genuine gospel offer that rests upon a universal desire for all to be saved. This message is intertwined with how God demonstrates his love towards *all* in sending Christ to die on the cross.

To the sinner, Bunyan chides and encourages him or her to appropriate and claim Christ. The sinner is to assume that God loves him or her in a saving manner. This is correlative to his maintenance during this period that assurance is the essence of faith. The sinner is to assume that God will save him or her as Christ is looked to in faith. Bunyan writes regarding this in *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*:

Thirdly, Then, in the next place, fly in all haste to Jesus Christ, thou being sensible of thy lost condition without him, secretly persuading of thy soul that Jesus Christ standeth open-armed to receive thee, to wash away thy sins, to clothe thee with his righteousness, and is willing, yea, heartily willing, to present thee before the presence of the glory of God and among the innumerable company of angels with exceeding joy.⁶³

There is a universal or hypothetical salvific will of God towards the sinner. This hypothetical salvific will applies not only to how the sinner views God subjectively, but what happened on the cross objectively.

The universal saving will of God is displayed objectively on the cross in Christ's death. After the previous quote, Bunyan anticipates the question regarding the basis or ground of knowing that Christ can be claimed. He answers that question in the next paragraph by stating that 'convictions' of the gospel will be rooted in knowing and appropriating that 'which is by

⁶² Scott Tatum also noted this lack of 'inter-relation' in his theology of God. See Tatum, 'The Theology of John Bunyan', 213.

⁶³ Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 495.

seeing thy sins washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ'.⁶⁴ In the Lutheran paradigm of law and grace, the law must first bring conviction and guilt:

And when that this is done [guilt from the Law], be sure, in the next place, thou do not straightway forget it and put it out of thy mind, that thou art condemned by the same covenant; and then do not content thyself until thou do find that God hath sent thee a pardon from heaven through the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, the mediator of the second covenant.⁶⁵

Here the law of God works first, but grace rests upon the assumption and assurance that a pardon was purchased for the sinner on Calvary. Again, Bunyan describes God's willingness to save the sinner: 'The motive that moveth God to have mercy upon sinners is not because they are willing to follow the law, but because he is willing to save them'.⁶⁶ God's will is assumed to be benevolent towards the sinner.

While God's will is to be viewed as hypothetically universal – willing all to be saved – there is also a strong particular aspect of God's will. This is apparent in Bunyan's maintenance of a strong stance on election and predestination that was considered earlier. God's will is particular in that he has elected some for grace and salvation and left others to their sins. It was also noted that there is one reference to Rom 4 in which Bunyan notes God's eternal purposes being carried out in the damnation of some and the salvation of others.

These two streams of universality and particularity in God's will naturally flow into the nature of God's accomplishments, more specifically the extent of the atonement. Bunyan views the cross as accomplishing two purposes of God, and a universal and a particular accomplishment in the cross seem evident in all four works during this period.

In *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, Bunyan addresses the extent of the atonement directly in a catechism section. The question, 'But why was he true God and true man?' is answered:

And again, God did prepare this body, the human nature of Christ, that it should be a sacrifice for sins, 'wherefore – he saith, Sacrifice and offering (that is, such as were offered by the law of Moses) thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me. He.x.5. In this body which God had prepared for him, which he took of the virgin, Ga.iv.4 in this he did bear all the sins of all his elect. 1 Pe.ii.24'.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid., 495.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 502.

⁶⁶ Emphasis mine. Ibid., 511.

⁶⁷ Bunyan, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, 170.

While this statement about the extent of the atonement is very particular, it is not exclusive to the non-elect. He does not say 'only the elect'. This is significant because in the same catechism section, he asserts a universalism accomplishment in the atonement so that a sinner might have assurance that Christ died for him or herself. He asks, 'How do men come by this righteousness and everlasting life?' The answer is,

By faith men lay hold of it, and apply it to their own souls in particular. Ga.ii.20. For it is by faith they are justified, as also saith the scripture. Ro.v.1. That his faith lays hold on and applies, that which this Christ of God hath done, and is doing, and owns it as his own.⁶⁸

In *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*, Bunyan repeatedly states that Christ died in a particular way for 'his children'.⁶⁹ Christ's work, both active and passive, 'is an end put to the law for righteousness by Jesus for all the elect of God'.⁷⁰ T. L. Underwood also posits Bunyan as 'Particular Baptist' who limited Christ's accomplishment to the elect.⁷¹

But on the other hand, Bunyan maintains that Christ died in a universal way for the 'sins of the world'.⁷² His gospel message is very universal in its consideration of the atonement. In *A Few Sighs From Hell* he avers, 'O Lord Jesus! what a load didst thou carry! What a burden didst thou bear of the sins of the world, and the wrath of God!'⁷³ In *A Vindication of Gospel Truths* he continued,

The word of the gospel, my friend, is, Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he rose again according to the scriptures, and that he is ascended from his disciples, to prepare a place for them according to the scriptures.⁷⁴

A death that was particular for those 'whom before as God he [Christ] knew and loved'⁷⁵ was also a death that accomplished a universal 'redemption'.⁷⁶

⁶⁸ Ibid., 170.

⁶⁹ Bunyan, *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*, 203, 204, 205.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 189.

⁷¹ T. L. Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism and the Lamb's War: The Baptist–Quaker Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 56.

⁷² Bunyan, *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*, 181, 203, 208.

⁷³ Bunyan, *A Few Sighs From Hell*, 706.

⁷⁴ Bunyan, *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*, 196.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 207.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 203.

In *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*. Bunyan talks in terms of limited mercy and limited satisfaction.⁷⁷ But shortly after, he makes it clear that there is an intention on behalf of God to offer mercy to all in the gospel based on the sufficiency of Christ's death for the world. Furthermore, a universal redemption is strongly asserted in *A Few Sighs from Hell*; to the unbeliever he writes, 'Consider what pains Christ Jesus took for the ransoming of thy soul . . . I say, consider what pains the Lord Jesus Christ took in bringing in redemption for sinners from these things'.⁷⁸ Richard Greaves's comment that 'what he did say on the subject [on the extent of the atonement] was fragmentary and slightly contradictory', seems very apropos. Bunyan's doctrines of election and predestination as well as of assurance and appropriation all point to an atonement that has dualistic divine intentions and accomplishments.

Christ's intercession

The primary place where consideration is given to connecting the streams of universality and particularity in God's will and accomplishments is found in Bunyan's understanding of Christ's atonement and intercession. Bunyan's theory of atonement is clearly substitutionary. For him, the cross is what accomplished: redemption,⁷⁹ satisfaction, remission of sins⁸⁰ and eternal propitiation.⁸¹ If there is any significant progress in doctrinal exposition during this period, it is found in how Bunyan views Christ's intercessory work. Throughout all his works of this period, he maintains these universal and particular themes; yet beginning early in *Vindication of Gospel Truths*, some development is made towards explaining how the universal nature of Christ's accomplishments is made efficacious.

The first consideration of Christ's particular intercession for the elect or for those who will believe is made in the context of a dispute with the Quakers regarding the mediating role of Christ. The Quakers thought that Christ was a mediator for everyone in the same way. For them, the experience of the conscience was thought to be the spirit of Christ given to everyone. Bunyan's reply included the following: 'No, Christ as he is mediator doth neither pray for the world, Jn.xvii.9. neither doth he give his Spirit to all that are in the world; for some are sensual, and have it not'.⁸² As Bunyan continued his arguments against the Quakers, he gave a similar statement a few pages later:

⁷⁷ Ibid., 536.

⁷⁸ Bunyan, *A Few Sighs From Hell*, 705.

⁷⁹ Bunyan, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, 144.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 147.

⁸¹ Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 534.

⁸² Bunyan, *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*, 192.

Methinks, I say, thou shouldest rather have said, then let us follow the Son of Mary, the Man Christ Jesus, the Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world, by his blood on the cross; who is now also at his Father's right hand making intercession for all those that do come to the Father by him; but they that are not for the truth, will advance anything but the truth.⁸³

The universal work of Christ is seen as being distributed through his particular work of intercession. This concept was built upon in some regards in *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*. As the office of the priest in the OT is considered, there are several statements made about Christ's intercession. One example appears as Bunyan explains the typology of the two stones that bore the names of the tribes of Israel. These stones signify, 'that when Jesus Christ was to enter into the holiest, then he was there to bear the names of his elect in the tables of his heart before the throne of God and the mercy-seat. He.xii.23'.⁸⁴ Bunyan continues in the same context to give the fullest explanation in his works of this period as to how the extent of the atonement relates to application. Under the rubric of 'Comfortable considerations from Christ's intercession' he writes (I quote at length):

It is partly by the virtue of Christ's intercession that that elect are brought in. There are many that are to come to Christ which are not yet brought in to Christ: and it is one part of his work to pray for their salvation too- 'Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe', though as yet they do not believe 'on me', but that they may believe 'through their word'. Jn.xvii.20. And let me tell thee soul, for thy comfort, who are a-coming in to Christ, panting and sighing, as if thy heart would break, I tell thee, soul, thou wouldest never have come to Christ, if he had not first, by the virtue of his blood and intercession, sent into thy heart an earnest desire after Christ; and let me tell thee also, that it is his *business* to make intercession for thee, not only that thou mightest come in, but that thou mightest be preserved when thou art come in. Compare He.vii.25. Ro.viii.33–39.⁸⁵

It is the intercessory work of Christ that pleads the merits which were gotten for all men in the cross. This ministry is the agency by which the Holy Spirit is sent to give application of Christ's work. Thus Bunyan concludes that the elect are brought in partly by Christ's intercession and partly by virtue

⁸³ Ibid., 194.

⁸⁴ Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 532.

⁸⁵ Emphasis his. Ibid., 532–3.

of his blood. It is completely by unmerited grace that Christ prays for and intercedes for the elect.

Covenantal structure

The doctrine of the covenant is the second area that evidences slight expositional development during this pre-prison period. His covenant schema employs the traditional Reformed understanding of the covenant of works inaugurated at the Garden and the ensuing covenant of grace that was inaugurated after the fall.

Though Richard Greaves avers that Bunyan's doctrine of the covenant did not appear until *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*,⁸⁶ there is a clear and significant statement made in his first title, *Some Gospel Truths Opened* as well as *A Few Sighs from Hell*.⁸⁷ Instead of seeing the doctrine of the covenant as a schema whereby the Puritan could find evidence for 'psychological comfort' and proof of election, Bunyan states that covenant of salvation (grace) is between the Father and the Son. Bunyan writes,

The Apostle, speaking of the promise, or covenant made between God and the Saviour (for that is his meaning,) saith on this wise; 'In hope of eternal life, which God that cannot like, promised before the world began'. Now this promise, or covenant was made with none but with the Son of God, the Saviour.⁸⁸

While viewing the covenant of grace as unilateral in that work, Bunyan asserts that man is indeed responsible within it. As Bunyan evidences no thought of any discrepancy because of man's responsibility, it seems best to agree with Richard Muller on this issue: it is wrong to set unilateral covenantal definitions in strong opposition to bilateral definitions of the covenant.⁸⁹ In other words, the covenantal schema cannot be reduced to strict legalism on one side (God covenanting with man) or pure election on the other (Father covenanting with the Son). It is more likely that Bunyan saw man's responsibility as an aspect of the unilateral covenant of grace.

Against Richard Greaves who sees Bunyan's covenant schema as coinciding with that of 'the strict Calvinists and Antinomians',⁹⁰ during this period Bunyan seems to maintain a moderate position. Bunyan does not err on the extreme of antinomian lawlessness, nor does he err on the other extreme of self-examination for evidence of election or preparationism. While Bunyan

⁸⁶ Greaves, *John Bunyan*, 98.

⁸⁷ Bunyan, *A Few Sighs from Hell*, 692, cf. 720, 721.

⁸⁸ Bunyan, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, 142.

⁸⁹ Richard Muller, *After Calvin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99, 177–81.

⁹⁰ Greaves, *John Bunyan*, 106.

stresses that the sinner must believe, works and the covenant of works are excluded from the covenant of grace and justification.⁹¹ All that the sinner is held responsible for is given by God through the Spirit and Christ's intercessory work. Bunyan is clear that there is conditionality, but 'for it is impossible for thee in that state [of being unregenerate] to do them'.⁹² In *A Few Sighs from Hell*, this conditionality is spoken of as 'terms of reconciliation'.⁹³ Because the Son is the ultimate participant in the covenant, he satisfies all its demands. Through this accomplishment, the Holy Spirit gives the gift of saving, effectual faith for which all people are responsible in the covenant of grace. Bunyan thus avoids antinomianism, proclaiming the need for a 'true' faith that produces fruit.

Amyraldian or high-Calvinist?

Thus far it has been demonstrated that Bunyan should not be so easily lumped together with the high-Calvinists of his time. In light of Bunyan's soteriology during this period, it would not be too much to conjecture that he would have been at odds with his compatriot John Owen, who rejected universal redemption and saw only *one* salvific purpose for the elect in the cross.⁹⁴ But was Bunyan's soteriology during this period Amyraldian?

Before answering this question there are a couple of items to consider. First, there is no evidence that Bunyan followed or read the theological works of Moïse Amyraut, who wrote in French. Secondly, while Amyraut was indeed a source of provocation within Reformed circles, he was also a figurehead of a larger stream of thought in Reformed theology.⁹⁵ In some respects, Amyraut is like John Calvin: his name is used to signify a theological system that was held by others. The criterion for this system upon which Bunyan's soteriology can be compared is summarised best by Karl Müller: '[the] essential point, then, of Amyraldianism is the combination of real particularism with a purely ideal universalism'.⁹⁶ K. Müller averred, '[The] main proposition is this: God wills all men to be saved, on condition that they believe . . . God

⁹¹ For an exoneration of Bunyan from the charges of antinomianism see Anjov Ahenakaa, 'Justification and the Christian life in John Bunyan: A Vindication of Bunyan from the Charge of Antinomianism', PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1997.

⁹² Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, 518.

⁹³ Bunyan, *A Few Sighs from Hell*, 691, cf. 703, 704.

⁹⁴ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 135–8.

⁹⁵ Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement*, 249.

⁹⁶ Karl Müller, 'Amyraut, Moïse', in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1951), 161. Though Louis Berkof refers to the two-fold decree of God, it is essentially the same as Karl Müller's twofold will of God. See Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 394.

also wills in particular to save a certain number of persons'.⁹⁷ This twofold core of Amyraldianism was echoed by Louis Berkhof and recently by Stephen Strehle.⁹⁸

In light of this criterion, Bunyan certainly took a mediate or dualistic view of the atonement during the pre-prison period of his life. His writings proffer that Christ's work on the cross and his work as an intercessor both have particular and universal aspects. This resonates well with Richard Greaves' ascertainment that 'no single theological label without careful qualification will fit Bunyan', but not so well with his next conclusion that Bunyan was not a 'moderate Calvinist'.⁹⁹ If Greaves's conclusion is correct, that Bunyan did not hold to a 'mediatory position' of the atonement, it would evidence a significant change in his soteriological structure.¹⁰⁰ Further research would need to be done to examine Bunyan's theological developments in his later works.

Conclusion

This study has tested the thesis that Bunyan held to a strict limited atonement or high-Calvinism and found it wanting. The significant conclusions from this study of Bunyan's pre-prison writings are fourfold. First, his understanding of the gospel and the nature of the atonement already exhibit Amyraldian inclinations not supralapsarian high-Calvinism. Secondly, Bunyan's theology, though not driven by exegesis or by expanded interaction with scholarship, still draws primarily from the text of scripture. Bunyan frequently answers questions only by quoting scripture thus providing a contextual clue to his theological method during this period. That there is no single overarching doctrine such as predestination that drives his theological engine bolsters Richard Greaves's claim that Bunyan was more interested in the personal conflict of the sinner with the justice and love of God in Christ.¹⁰¹ Thirdly, there appears to be very little development in terms of corrections or changes in doctrinal schemata. There is a great deal of continuity between the works of this period. Fourthly, Bunyan is no string-of-pearls theologian who is willing to assert truths that are contradictory to or non-cohesive with other doctrines. Clichés regarding puritan-era Calvinism must not be assumed in Bunyan studies. He was not an antinomian, or a preparationist, or a cookie-cutter Calvinist; his works must be considered on their own merits.

⁹⁷ Muller, 'Amyraut, Moise', 161.

⁹⁸ Stephen Strehle, 'Universal Grace and Amyraldianism', *Westminster Theological Journal* 51/2 (1989), 356.

⁹⁹ Greaves, *John Bunyan*, 159.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 155.