

Christians Who Dared to Differ

John Biddle (1615 – 1662)

By Anthony Buzzard¹



John Biddle (1615-1662) was a distinguished British academic, graduate of Oxford, and at the age of 26 elected headmaster of Crypt Grammar School in Gloucester, England. Since he was asked to teach Scripture, he began a painstaking examination of the Bible. He was supposed to teach his students according to the catechism of the Church of England but soon found this impossible. His relentless search for truth in Scripture produced in him an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible. He knew the whole of the New Testament by heart in English *and* in Greek. He admitted that he had some difficulty in remembering the Greek text after Rev. 4!

He spoke against the spurious Trinitarian verse in I John 5:7 and explained the oneness of Jesus and the Father as “an union in consent and agreement...but never an union in essence.”² He later debated with Bishop Ussher (of “Ussher’s chronology” fame) and outwitted him asserting that the Father is the only true God! He produced a pamphlet entitled “Twelve Arguments against the Deity of the Holy Spirit.” Someone gave a copy to the magistrates and he was committed to jail.

In 1646 Biddle was summoned to London and confined in the Gatehouse at Westminster while his trial dragged on. He remained in prison for five years, mostly for his questioning of the Trinity. He spoke of the church fathers as those who “did in outward profession so put on Christ, as that in heart they did not put off Plato.”³ He alluded to Matthew 19:4 where he maintained that Jesus, in referring to “him that made them in the beginning,” attributed the creation to a Being other than himself. Deserted by his friends, he spent most of the rest of his life in prison.

The British Houses of Parliament passed the following law:

Any who shall by preaching, printing or writing controvert the deity of the Son or the equality of Christ with the Father, shall suffer the pains of death, as in the case of felony, without benefit of clergy. Any who shall maintain that man hath by nature free will to turn to God; that the soul dieth after the body is dead;... that baptizing of infants is void and that such persons ought to be baptized again; that the use of arms is unlawful; that the churches of England are no more churches nor their ministers and ordinances true minister and ordinances (shall be imprisoned).⁴

Biddle had single-handedly recovered central truths of the Bible. He claimed that he had read none of the (unitarian) Polish Brethren’s literature before coming to his own conclusions.

On February 10, 1652 Biddle was released. He remained in London addressing small groups on Sundays, but he was never officially ordained. He produced a large number of tracts on different biblical topics, but principally his *A Twofold Catechism*, consisting almost entirely of Scripture verses. In his preface he speaks of “all Catechisms generally being so stuffed with the supposals and traditions of men, that the least part of them is derived from the Word of God...not one quotation amongst many being a whit to the purpose” (i.e. having any point at all).⁵

From his catechism he banned all phrases like “eternal generation of the Son,” “God dying,” “God made man,” “mother of God.” The catechism was ordered to be burnt, and he was again imprisoned along with his publisher, Richard Moore. Two days later some brethren from Poland arrived in London with tracts translated into English by Biddle and printed by Moore!

Biddle was charged with blasphemy and heresy. He escaped a capital sentence but remained in confinement. Some influential persons were bold enough to ask parliament:

whether Biddle does not, in fact, profess faith in God by Jesus Christ. Is he not like Apollos, mighty in the Scriptures according to their most obvious nearest signification, and not according to the remote and mystical interpretations?⁶

A typical argument of Biddle’s is this: “he that saith Christ died, saith that Christ was not God, for God could not die. But every Christian saith that Christ died, therefore every Christian saith that Christ was not God.”⁷ His last days were spent writing on the personal reign of Jesus Christ on the earth.

In 1658 he was released once more. He maintained a steady contact with the Polish brethren. An observer remarked that “there is little or nothing blameworthy in him, except his opinions.” Government agents pursued Biddle frequently but many were forced to admire his “strict, exemplary life, full of modesty, sobriety and forbearance, no ways contentious, altogether taken up with the great things of God revealed in the Scriptures.”⁸

On June 1, 1662, he was holding a Bible study in his own home. An armed party entered the room and carried him off and imprisoned him before a Judge Brown. Five weeks later, sick with jail fever, he died, confident of his hope in the resurrection at the Second Coming. He had been unable to pay the £100 demanded as a fine. He is the father of British unitarianism.

¹ Excerpted from: *Jesus Was Not A Trinitarian: A Call to Return to the Creed of Jesus*, pp. 324 - 326
by Anthony Buzzard

² Alan Eyre, *The Protesters*, The Christadelphian, 1975, 123 – 24.

³ Ibid., 125.

⁴ Ibid., 125.

⁵ Biddle’s *A Twofold Catechism* can be read at <http://home.pacific.net.au/~amaxwell/biddle/000start.htm>

⁶ Ibid., 129.

⁷ Ibid., 130.

⁸ Ibid., 130, 131.