



BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

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When the Westminster Assembly began in 1643, John Bunyan was not yet fifteen years old. As a sixteen-year-old he served in the Parliamentary Army. Although he came to know John Owen, he did not generally travel in the circles of the well-educated Westminster divines. *The London Confession* of the Calvinistic Baptists, which he may have had a part in producing in 1677, was nevertheless almost identical with the *Westminster Confession* except with regard to the sacraments and polity. Coming from the lower middle-class, Bunyan reflects the impact of the Puritan movement upon mid-seventeenth-century England, and he in turn has become perhaps the most influential of all English Puritans through his literary works, including his autobiographical *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and the allegorical books, *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Holy War*.

Bunyan was born in the village of Elstow, Bedfordshire, just south of the town of Bedford, in November of 1628. The ancestors of his father, Thomas Bunyan (1603–1676), had lived in this region since at least the twelfth century. His mother, Margaret Bentley, was also a native of Elstow, born in 1603 of people ‘who, though humble in station,

were yet decent and worthy in their ways'. His father designated himself in his will a 'brasier', what would later be termed a 'whitesmith, a maker and mender of pots and kettles'. Although John Bunyan would later be styled as 'a tinker and a poor man', he was not a totally itinerant craftsman, but had his forge and workshop by his settled home in Elstow.

Bunyan's mother died in June 1644, and his father remarried within two months. The arrival of a stepmother may have led to his joining the Army by the time of his reaching the regulation age of sixteen in November 1644. Posted to Newport Pagnell, he seems not to have seen any serious battle action in the Parliamentary Army, although he does refer to a soldier who went to a siege in his place and was shot in the head and killed. Bunyan's regiment was demobilized in July 1647, and he returned to Elstow.

He married a woman whose name is not known, probably in late 1648 or early 1649. She came from a godly home and brought with her two books that were to have a formative influence upon Bunyan's spirituality—Arthur Dent's *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and Lewis Bayly's *The Practice of Piety*. He gave up his habit of swearing and became regular in his attendance at church. Although he became 'a brisk talker on religion', he realized that he lacked the personal knowledge of God that he sensed in some poor women whose conversation he overheard. His quest for spiritual reality and an assurance of his own salvation led to an agonizing inner conflict for a period of three or four years before he found peace of soul, as described in his *Grace Abounding*.

In 1653 he joined the Nonconformist church to which those poor women belonged. It met for worship in St. John's Church, Bedford, a congregation founded by eleven working-men in 1650 as a result of Oliver Cromwell's policy of toleration for Protestant separatists. The rector was John Gifford, whose ministry before his death in 1655 had a positive influence on Bunyan. It was also in 1655 that he

lost his wife, who had borne him four children, Mary (who was blind), John, Thomas and Elizabeth. It was probably in this same year that he moved to Bedford.

In 1655 he was elected one of the deacons and began in private ministry to exercise his gift of exhortation. In 1657 he was formally set apart to the office of preacher, and as he travelled, pursuing his trade as a tinker, he used every opportunity to preach, 'in woods, in barns, on village greens, or in town chapels', and his fame as a preacher spread. In some places the official ministers gave him permission, in other places there was opposition.

Bunyan also began to write. His first published work appeared in 1656, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, which was an attack upon the mysticism of the Quakers. This was answered by Edward Burrough, and Bunyan responded in 1657 with *A Vindication of Gospel Truths*. These early works show an energetic style, a command of plain English, and a thorough knowledge of the Bible.

With the Restoration in 1660, laws against Nonconformity were revived, and Bunyan was arrested for preaching without licence on November 12 at the hamlet of Lower Samsell by Harlington, about thirteen miles south of Bedford. He was imprisoned in the county jail, where he would spend most of the next twelve years, although he was allowed occasional liberty to preach in Bedford and even to visit some Christians in London.

In 1659 Bunyan had married a second wife, Elizabeth, who cared for his four motherless children and eventually bore him two more, Sarah and Joseph. During his lengthy imprisonment she earnestly and diligently pleaded with the authorities for his release, but to no avail. To help support his family from prison, he made long tagged laces, 'many hundred gross of which he sold to the hawkers'. His imprisonment, however, gave him greater time and incentive to write. At least eight minor works were published between 1663 and 1665. Then in 1666 appeared *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Bunyan's spiritual autobiography.

He was released from prison in 1666, but within six weeks he was arrested again because he would not give up preaching. During the next six years in jail his writing productivity dropped off, but in 1672 he produced his *Defence of Justification by Faith*, a vehement attack upon a work by Rev. Edward Fowler, Rector of Northhill. Also in that year he produced the *Confession of My Faith and Reason of My Practice* as a vindication of his teaching in order to gain his freedom. Thanks to Charles II's covert intention of favouring Roman Catholics in England, Bunyan was among the Nonconformists pardoned in 1672 and finally gained his release after almost twelve years in jail. He was already called to be the Pastor of the Nonconformist church in Bedford, which was no longer able to meet in St. John's Church, but in a barn in the orchard of a member of the congregation.

From his centre in Bedford, Bunyan spread his ministry throughout the county and beyond. He applied to the authorities for licenses for preachers and preaching sites in the surrounding country:

Among these he made stated circuits, being playfully known as 'Bishop Bunyan', his diocese being a large one, and, in spite of strenuous efforts at repression by the ecclesiastical authorities, steadily increasing in magnitude and importance.

He was imprisoned again in 1676, and it was on this occasion that John Owen sought to aid in gaining his release. It was Owen who recommended the manuscript of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* to his publisher, Nathaniel Ponder, and who, when asked by Charles II why he listened to an uneducated tinker, said, 'Could I possess the tinker's abilities for preaching, please your Majesty, I would gladly relinquish all my learning.'

The Pilgrim's Progress appeared in 1678, with a second edition in the same year and a third in 1679. According to the author's own claim, it was produced in prison. Edmund Venables, following John Brown's 1885 biography, believes

this to be his last, six-months imprisonment, but Christopher Hill argues for its having been written no later than 1672, Bunyan delaying its publication because of concern over the propriety of writing fiction about so serious a subject. He need not have worried. As William Haller points out, Bunyan's 'great allegories were but single items coming from a single practitioner—though a genius—in a vast literature, only a portion of which has been preserved...' reflecting the 'similitudes' of many Puritan sermons. J.I. Packer says that 'Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* serves as a kind of gazetteer to the contents of their sermons.' He also says that it reflects the fact that the Puritans were great warriors:

The Puritans fought for truth against error, for personal holiness against temptations to sin, for ordered wisdom against chaotic folly, for church purity and national righteousness against corruption and hostility in both areas. One facet of their greatness was their principled hostility to all evils that stood in the way of godliness and true faith, and their willingness, much as they loved peace, to go out and fight those things, and to keep fighting as long as the evils were there.

Bunyan is usually classified as a Baptist. He himself deplored denominational labels and termed himself 'Congregational', but this may refer merely to his church's polity. As his 1673 work *Differences in Judgment about Water-Baptism no Bar to Communion* shows, he would not exclude those who differed with regard to the form or subjects of baptism. Calvinistic in his theology, he is to be regarded as a Particular Baptist of an open sort. Alexander F. Mitchell believes that his influence may have softened the 1677 statement, 'a Confession of Faith put forth by the Elders and Brethren of many congregations of Christians baptized upon profession of their faith', which was reprinted in 1688 and approved by over a hundred congregations in London, July 3–11, 1689, commonly known as 'The London Confession of 1688'.

The Pilgrim's Progress was followed in 1680 by *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* and in 1682 by *The Holy War Made by Shaddai upon Diabolus*. In 1684 there appeared the second part of *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which Christian's wife Christiana makes her pilgrimage to the heavenly city. By this time Bunyan was famous for both his writing and his preaching. His friend Charles Doe reports that when he preached in London,

if there were but one day's notice given, there would be more people come together to hear him preach than the meeting house would hold. I have seen to hear him preach by my computation about twelve-hundred at a morning lecture by seven o'clock on a working day in the dark winter time.

A contemporary described Bunyan's appearance as follows:

He was tall of stature, strong-boned though not corpulent, somewhat of a ruddy face with sparkling eyes, wearing his hair on his upper lip after the old British fashion; his hair reddish, but in his latter days had sprinkled with grey; his nose well-set, but not declining or bending, and his mouth moderately large, his forehead something high, and his habit always plain and modest.

His bearing seems to have been consistent with his message. Another contemporary described him thus:

He appeared in countenance to be of a stern and rough temper, but in his conversation mild and affable, not given to loquacity or much discourse in company, unless some urgent occasion required it, observing never to boast of himself in his parts, but rather seem low in his own eyes, and submit himself to the judgment of others.

A third contemporary wrote:

His countenance was grave and sedate, and did so to the life discover the inward frame of his heart, that it was convincing to the beholders, and did strike something of awe in to them that had nothing of the fear of God.

In the spring of 1688 Bunyan had suffered an attack of the 'sweating sickness', from which he was weakened. In August he travelled on horseback first to Reading, where he sought to reconcile a son to his father, and then through forty miles of drenching rain to London. He preached for the last time on August 19, then was seized with a fever and died on the 31st. He was buried in Bunhill Fields, Finsbury, London. During his dying days he continued to share his spiritual wisdom: 'No sin against God can be little, because it is against the great God of heaven and earth; but if the sinner can find out a little God, it may be easy to find out little sins.' At the end it was difficult to say much, and that occasioned this remark: '... when you prayest, let your heart be without words than your words without a heart.'

This biographical account is taken from William S. Barker, *Puritan Profiles* (Fearn: Mentor: 1999), a collection of biographical profiles of 54 leading Puritans, most of whom were involved in the compiling of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

