



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, AUTHOR'S APOLOGY

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS (FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1678) was written by John Bunyan while he was in a Bedford, England, jail. But why was an itinerant preacher who dearly loved the Word of God writing from a prison cell?

The story of John Bunyan and how he came to be imprisoned actually begins in AD 1324 with the birth of another baby boy named John—John Wycliffe. At that time, Catholicism was the dominant religion in most of Western Europe, including England where Wycliffe lived. Although the Catholic Church has its roots in the New Testament church, gradually over the years, it had accumulated teachings and practices that were contrary to what the Word of God teaches.

John Wycliffe studied theology, law and philosophy at Oxford and eventually became a doctor of theology. He spent a great deal of time studying his Bible. He discovered that what he was learning from Scripture contradicted what the Catholic Church taught, and he set out calling the church back to the authority of God's Word. The "Morning Star of the Reformation," as Wycliffe is called, was responsible for producing the first handwritten version of the Bible in English, enabling thousands of people to know for themselves what God says in His Word. He and his "Bible men" (as their critics called them) preached the *true* gospel of Jesus Christ—that salvation comes through faith by the grace of God (apart from good works as the Church taught) and that the Bible alone (not the Church) was the final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

After Wycliffe's death in 1384, John Hus, one of Wycliffe's disciples, continued the call for church reformation from his home in Prague. Because of his teachings, Hus spent 73 days in confinement, was tried and then condemned to death as a heretic. When asked to recant his

beliefs, he said, "In the truth of the gospel which I have written, taught and preached I will die today with gladness." As he was tied to the stake and the fire was kindled beneath him along with the very manuscripts of Wycliffe, Hus cried out, "In 100 years, God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed!" That was in 1415.

A little over 100 years later, John Hus' words came true in an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther. In 1517, after searching the Scriptures and realizing that salvation came by God's grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, Luther posted 95 theses on the church door at Wittenberg, Germany. These statements listed 95 points on which Luther believed that the Church had departed from the teaching of God's Word. When told to recant his statements (which the pope declared "heretical"), Luther said, "Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen." He was then forced into exile, during which time he translated the Bible into the common language of the German people. Luther died of natural causes in 1546.

During this time, reformation was continuing in other parts of the world as well. In England, the Roman Catholic Church's blatant disregard for the authority of God's Word can be summed up in this statement by a clergyman to William Tyndale: "We are better to be without God's laws than the Pope's." Outraged, Tyndale replied, "I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause the boy that drives the plow to know more of the scriptures than you!"

God *did* spare Tyndale's life, which allowed him to translate the New Testament from Greek (Wycliffe had done his translation from the Latin Vulgate) into then-modern English. He used a moveable-type printing press that Johann Gutenberg had invented in the 1450s to print vast quantities of the newly translated Bible, distributing them to the English masses. His work later became the basis for the Authorized King James Version of 1611. Because of his beliefs, Tyndale was imprisoned for 500 days, tried for heresy, convicted and then strangled and burned at the stake in 1536.

It was in 1536 that a young man named John Calvin arrived in Geneva, Switzerland, where the Reformation had already started under the direction of William Farel. Calvin had been forced to flee Paris a few years before after preaching a sermon calling the church to return to the true gospel. He provided organization to the Reformers' thoughts and ideas and wrote the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Although there were differences between what the various Reformers taught, they all united around five main doctrines: *Sola Fide* (by faith

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alone), *Sola Gratia* (by grace alone), *Sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone), *Soli Deo Gloria* (glory to God alone), *Solus Christus* (by Christ alone).

Of course, the radical reform that was sweeping through Europe did not leave governments untouched. Although there was much religious ferment going on everywhere, we'll focus on the events in England leading up to John Bunyan's time.

When Tyndale was martyred, his last words were, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!" The king on the throne at that time was Henry VIII. He had broken with the Roman Catholic Church (he was upset that the pope would not grant him a divorce from Catherine of Aragon) and declared himself the head of the Church of England. Although he was influenced by the Reformers to some extent and instituted moderate reform in the church, he "remained, in his doctrine, a Roman Catholic to the end of his life."¹

After Henry died, his son Edward VI (at the age of nine) ascended the throne. Although he was sympathetic to those who desired to reform the church and instituted legislation that supported the Reformers, Edward died when he was sixteen, in 1553.

He was followed by his older sister, Mary I, a staunch Catholic, who overturned the reforming work of her brother. The queen's persecution of the Reformers was merciless and earned her the nickname "Bloody Mary." Although many Protestants were put to death, some fled to the continent, where they came in contact with Reformation leaders such as Calvin, who continued to call for reform in church practices as well as doctrine.

After Mary died, her younger sister Elizabeth I took the throne. "Good Queen Bess," as she was called, endeavored to restore peace to her realm by attempting to build bridges between the various religious ideals. She reasserted England's independence from Rome with the Act of Supremacy in 1559 and attempted to bring order to the Church of England with the Act of Uniformity, also in 1559. This act required that every man assent to the *Book of Common Prayers* and attend church once a week or be fined. However, the prayer book contained teaching which the Puritans (a group which desired to reform the church completely from within) rejected as unbiblical. This led those who disagreed to leave the Anglican church (although a few Puritans decided to stay and continue to push for reform within the church). Those who followed a man named Robert Browne became known as Brownists or Separatists, while those who followed Thomas Cartwright were known as Presbyterians. Persecution of

1 Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn, *From Puritanism to Nonconformity*, Evangelical Press of Wales, England, p. 12, 1962.

those not part of the established church increased throughout Elizabeth's reign.

After the death of Elizabeth in 1603, her cousin James I (then king of Scotland) ruled England and Scotland jointly for the next 22 years. The Puritans thought that James would be sympathetic to their ideas because he came from the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. However, James was more concerned with power than truth; and although he convened a conference to discuss the Puritans' petitions, those attending the conference were leaders of the Anglican church who had strayed even further from biblical teaching and opposed Puritan thought. You may have heard of the main product of this conference: the 1611 King James Bible (over 70% of which was based on Tyndale's translation).

Because life was becoming more unbearable for them, many left the country. In fact, it was in 1620 that the voyage of the *Mayflower* took place, bringing the Pilgrims to American soil. The Plymouth Colony was settled by the Pilgrims (or Separatists) in 1620. The Massachusetts Bay Colony (1628) was settled by the Puritans (or, as they called themselves, "Non-separating Congregationalists" since they did not consider themselves to have separated from the Church of England, although they separated themselves from its errors).

In 1625 James died and his son Charles I became king. Three years later, John Bunyan, the author of our story about Pilgrim, was born into this religious and political turmoil, which would only get worse.

King Charles and Archbishop Laud worked to enforce Elizabeth's Act of Uniformity in various ways, forcing everyone to conform to the teachings of the church. Those of a "tender conscience" were grieved by these teachings and practices and refused to conform, facing severe persecution. Eventually, Charles I and the archbishop attempted to make the Scots also conform. But instead, the Scots rebelled and introduced the National Covenant.

The religious and political turmoil caused a divide between Parliament and the king and resulted in a war between those loyal to the king (known as "Royalists" or "Cavaliers") and those (called "Roundheads") who agreed with the changes Parliament wanted to make in the government and the Church of England. Oliver Cromwell, a vibrant Puritan, became the commander of the parliamentary army (of which Bunyan was a member from 1644–1647) and eventually led them to victory over the Cavaliers. Charles I was tried for treason in 1648 and executed in 1649.

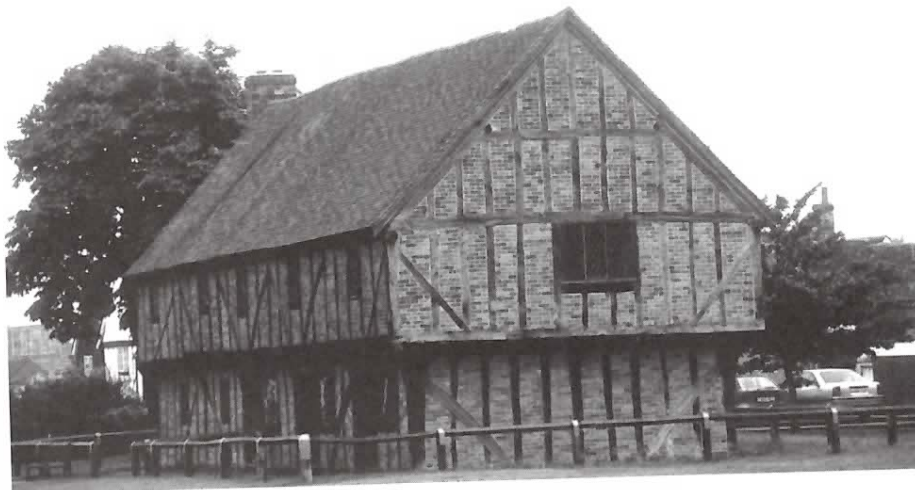
Cromwell abolished the monarchy, and England became a commonwealth with Cromwell as the Lord Protector of the Realm. The Puritans experienced great religious freedom and tolerance during his leadership (1649–1658).

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During this time John Bunyan married and began an intense spiritual struggle (lasting from 1648 to 1652), which is chronicled in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and reflected in *Pilgrim's Progress* in various places. At some point in his ordeal, Bunyan encountered Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians, which encouraged him greatly that he was not alone in the struggles and temptations he was facing. Of Luther's commentary, Bunyan later wrote in *Grace Abounding*:

It also was so old that it was ready to fall piece from piece if I did but turn it over. Now I was pleased much that such an old book had fallen into my hands; the which, when I had but a little way perused, I found my condition, in his experience, so largely and profoundly handled, as if his book had been written out of my heart. This made me marvel; for thus thought I, This man could not know anything of the state of Christians now, but must needs write and speak the experience of former days. ... I do prefer this book of Martin Luther upon the Galatians, excepting the Holy



Bible, before all the books that ever I have seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience.

John Gifford (after whom Evangelist, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, is modeled) also served as a spiritual mentor to Bunyan. In 1653, after finally being assured that he was indeed a child of God who had been chosen from before the foundation of the world and whose sins had been forgiven, Bunyan joined Gifford's independent congregation (which was not part of the state church) in Bedford, England. He also began preaching at various places around the countryside, drawing on his own experiences and knowledge of the Scriptures since he had no formal training.

He continued preaching until Cromwell died and the monarchy, under Charles II, was restored in April 1660. The king began at once to withdraw the religious freedom the country had experienced, and those who refused to conform to the king's decrees were incarcerated under the Elizabethan Act of Uniformity (see above). The "Nonconformists" refused to use the *Book of Common Prayer* or to attend services at "state" churches, and instead used the Bible to guide them and attended local gatherings of like-minded believers.

In November 1660, Bunyan was arrested for not conforming to the king's edicts and spent the next twelve years in jail. When he was questioned by a Mr. Cobb about whether or not he would "leave off" preaching, Bunyan responded by quoting the Morning Star of the Reformation, "Wyckliffe saith that he which leaveth off preaching and learning of the Word of God for fear of excommunication of men, he is already excommunicated of God, and shall in the day of judgment be counted a traitor

to Christ.”²

During his imprisonment, he supported his family by making shoe laces and writing several books (among them *Profitable Meditations*, *Christian Behaviour*, *The Holy City* and *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*). He was released from jail because of a royal pardon in May 1672 and became pastor of the independent church at Bedford, which was meeting in a barn.

All of this finally brings us to 1677 when John Bunyan was once again jailed for preaching without license. He spent six months in a jail on a bridge over the River Ouse. It was here that Bunyan finished penning his most famous work, *Pilgrim's Progress*, which he originally wrote to entertain his children when they came to the one-room jail to visit him.

After being released from prison, John Bunyan spent his remaining years writing and preaching around the countryside. He died on September 3, 1688, from a cold he caught after being drenched in a heavy downpour while trying to reconcile a father and son. His tomb (pictured here) is in Bunhill Fields, outside of London, where he is buried with other Nonconformists.



2 A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan, Minister of the Gospel at Bedford in November, 1660, by John Bunyan, MDCCLXV. Bunyan probably knew of Wycliffe through reading John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, which was one of the only two books Bunyan had with him while in jail—the other was the Bible.