

**“SPIRITUAL AND PSYCHIC TRANSFORMATION”**

**(To be published in the forthcoming volume of the**

*Journal of Psychology and Christianity*)

**Spiritual and Psychic Transformation: Understanding the Psychological Dimensions  
of John Bunyan’s Mental Illness and Healing**

**John Sneep and Arlette Zinck  
The King’s University College  
Edmonton, Alberta**

**Abstract**

John Bunyan's 17<sup>th</sup> Century autobiography, *Grace Abounding*, records both his spiritual unrest and his psychological torment but gives no clues to his remarkable recovery. This paper will attempt to clarify Bunyan's diagnosis and the nature of his spiritual and psychic transformation. We will argue that, preceding bouts of severe depression, Bunyan suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder, his obsession with the idea of his own reprobation resulting in a compulsive reading of scripture. Curiously, Bunyan's scripture reading also appears to be a key element in his recovery. We will contend that, in his fictional depiction of Christian's battle against the giant Despair in *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan most fully explains how the object of his compulsions finally becomes the "key" that releases both Christian and Bunyan himself from the grips of spiritual and psychological illness.

## **Spiritual and Psychic Transformation: Understanding the Psychological Dimensions of John Bunyan's Mental Illness and Healing**

John Bunyan was a 17<sup>th</sup> Century tinker turned non-conformist preacher who challenged the state-supported teachings of the Church of England and was imprisoned as a result. While in prison he wrote *Grace Abounding*, an autobiographical account of his spiritual and psychological struggles, and his most famous work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, considered to be an allegory of his own spiritual journey. Bunyan's spiritual and psychological turmoil have been the subject of much speculation by literary scholars who have borrowed insights from psychology and by psychologists trained in the art and science of psychodiagnostics. As a result of their retrospective analyses, there are a variety of hypotheses concerning Bunyan's psychological distress. Though Bunyan makes brief reference to his own recovery, his remarkable change from anxious and depressive angst to psychological and spiritual wholeness is not documented and has been the subject of much speculation. In this paper, we will revisit Bunyan's struggles and propose a 21<sup>st</sup> Century diagnosis. We will also examine his transformation as described metaphorically in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. John Bunyan's story is one of psychological and spiritual transformation, from debilitating anxiety and depression (which prevented Bunyan from experiencing God's grace though he desperately sought it), to spiritual maturity and psychological healing. Such transformations are not very common even today. Perhaps Bunyan has something to teach us who work with those who experience debilitating psychological distress.

Bunyan's 17<sup>th</sup> Century contemporaries, Robert Burton and Richard Baxter, would have diagnosed him with melancholia, according to Greaves (2002). Leudar and Sharrock (2002a, 2002b) reviewed four early, retrospective Bunyan diagnoses: Hippolyt Taine, in

1877, used the term ‘monomania’ (a pathological obsession with a single subject or idea); Josiah Royce, in 1894, focused on Bunyan’s ‘insistent ideas’ or impulses; William James, in 1902, ascribed to Bunyan a morbid melancholy typical of religious visionaries along with a divided self; and Pierre Janet, in 1903, diagnosed *les idee obsedantes*—‘obsessive scruples’ or ‘fixed ideas’. More recently, Andrew Brink (1975) used object-relations theory to describe Bunyan’s search for attachment to a father-God object as the precursor to his “severe and prolonged depression” with “bipolar periodicity.” Bunyan’s obsessive fear of “selling” his Saviour (a fear of giving way to the temptation to blaspheme God and reject salvation) and his consequent compulsive, repetitious and torturous examination of ‘the Esau text’ (Heb. 12:16-17) drove him to what Bunyan self-described as a kind of “madness” but also, eventually, toward healing, according to Vera Camden (2002). Bunyan’s intense search of scripture exacerbated his psychological symptoms, but his prolonged anxiety about being too late to receive God’s grace eventually produced dysthymia in Richard Greaves’ view. Greaves (2002) also discusses the possibility that Bunyan experienced some major depressive episodes.

### ***A Current Clinical Diagnosis***

In our view, Bunyan’s six to seven year long intense psychological struggle, as described in *Grace Abounding*, was primarily with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) rather than melancholia, monomania, depression or dysthymia (all mood disorders). When, as a young man, he became aware of his sin, his predilection towards anxiety caused him to develop obsessive fears and doubts about his salvation. These spiritual doubts in turn fed his psychological angst. Thus, Bunyan’s autobiography is a story of a man whose brilliant mind is almost constantly active, engaged in an intense struggle

between his unwanted, ego-dystonic and obsessive fears of eternal damnation and a set of desperately compulsive acts that are intentionally but ineffectively directed at removing that obsessive fear. Eventually, because his struggle is so prolonged and intense, it culminates in distorted thinking and then in one or more major depressive episodes. This struggle is a spiritual one, but it has serious psychological consequences.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (1994), obsessions are “persistent ideas, thoughts, impulses, or images that are experienced as intrusive and inappropriate and that cause marked anxiety or distress” (p.418). Among the most common forms of obsession are those vividly described by Bunyan: unrelenting fears about contamination, pathological doubting and uncertainty, and intrusive, even horrific impulses. Bunyan worried obsessively that he was contaminated by an unforgivable sin. He was plagued by doubts about the possibility of salvation and with horrific impulses or temptations to blaspheme and to reject Christ.

Compulsions are described in the DSM-IV as repetitive behaviors, which may take the form of ordering, checking or cleaning rituals, or rigidly stereotypical and repeated mental acts such as praying, counting and repeating certain words or phrases. A person with an obsessive fear of contamination by germs, for example, may develop a compulsive habit of hand washing. However, no amount of hand washing will alleviate their fear. To address his intense, obsessive fear of eternal damnation, Bunyan sought reassurances of his faith and divine election by desperately searching scripture and praying, but his reading became compulsive in its repetition and ineffectiveness. In fact, as with others who suffer with OCD, Bunyan’s compulsive search seemed to exacerbate his obsessive fears and doubts rather than relieve them.

Although the etiology of OCD is still not well understood, recent evidence supports a biological basis (Samuels & Nestadt, 1997). Although OCD is viewed as a chronic mental illness, Ravizza, Maina and Bogetto (1997) demonstrated that there are three subtypes of OCD, one where sufferers progressively worsen, another where patients' symptoms remain stable over time, and a third where patients, apparently like Bunyan, follow a fluctuating course. In the latter case, there may be symptom-free periods of significant duration (four or more months) and even some complete remissions. However, those who follow a fluctuating course may experience more severe obsessions and, according to Masellis, Rector & Richter (2003), it is the severity of obsessions, rather than compulsions, that most affects patients' quality of life. It is also known that, as in Bunyan's case, increasing severity of OCD is depressogenic (Tynes & Winstead, 1999). In fact, Samuels and Nestadt (1997) found that 85% of OCD patients develop secondary, clinically significant depression. In this respect, Ravizza et. al. (1997) speculate that episodic OCD may in fact be a form of "masked depression." If so, and if depression is somewhat more amenable to treatment than OCD, that might help explain Bunyan's apparent recovery.

Bunyan seemed to have had an early though mild onset to his anxiety disorder. He was likely a worrier, a nervous and perhaps somewhat perfectionistic child. He noted in *Grace Abounding* (Bunyan, 2004) that he experienced fearful dreams and dreadful visions during his childhood, and already at age nine or ten, he was fearfully tormented concerning the hellfire that surely awaited him. His childhood anxieties had a cyclical course as he stated that his tormenting thoughts came and went, alternating with periods of reckless abandonment to his 'evil lusts.' Some events in Bunyan's youth may have

exacerbated his anxieties—a near drowning and snake poisoning, and the killing of a sentinel who had taken his place at guard duty when he served in the military. Bunyan’s peculiar and guilty youthful yearning to ring the bells in his church, the consequent worries he had concerning the bell falling on him and the compensatory behaviors of standing under a beam, avoiding the steeple door, and running away document an early experience of some anxiety, perhaps already of some obsessive compulsivity.

It seems that Bunyan’s anxiety reached a crisis point when, as a young man, he experienced the strength of the competing urges to heed the voice of heaven and quit sinning, or yield to the powerful temptation to enjoy the pleasures of sin. The thought that would soon become an obsession to him then occurred, the fear that he had committed the unforgivable sin. Bunyan illustrated the obsessive quality of his guilty fear when he wrote: “I was afraid to let this sense and sight [of his own wickedness] go quite off my mind,” (Bunyan, 2004, ¶ 86)<sup>1</sup> and “I was driven to my wits’ end, not knowing what to say, or how to answer these temptations” (¶ 60). He also wrote that his doubts about God, Christ and scripture:

did make such a seizure upon my spirit, and did so overweigh my heart, both with their number, continuance, and fiery force, that I felt as if there were nothing else but these from morning to night within me, and as though indeed there could be room for nothing else.” (¶ 99)

Now some very serious spiritual questions, doubts, and fears exacerbated his proclivity towards anxiety. The obsessive temptation to “sell Christ” became so pervasive that Bunyan “could neither eat [his] food, stoop for a pin, chop a stick, or cast [his] eye to look on this or that, but still the temptation would come” (¶ 135). Unrelentingly, for a

period of a year or more, repeatedly with only brief periods of respite, he was plagued by these powerful obsessive thoughts, experiencing no relief “one day in a month, no not sometimes one hour in many days together, unless [he] was asleep” (§ 133).

The compulsive side of Bunyan’s anxiety disorder also surfaced at a fairly young age. Finding the Ranter’s (a religious cult) teachings about sin unacceptable, he began to search the Bible, and he “was then never out of the Bible, either by reading or meditation, still crying out to God, that I might know the way to heaven and glory” (§ 46). He searched scripture for over a year, looking for one specific text that might provide him comfort, a text he eventually found in the Apocrypha (Ecclesiasticus 2:10). His compulsive efforts to provide assurance also included an attempt to work a miracle as a sign of his faith, to pray “wherever I was, whether at home or abroad, in house or in field” (§ 56), and to repetitively sing Psalm 51.

At length, after struggling unsuccessfully to eliminate his obsessive fear through various compulsive acts, Bunyan despaired and resolved that he might as well capitulate, accept his unpardonable state, “sell Christ,” and go on sinning (§ 23, 103, 135). The compulsive act of sinning wilfully became so powerful a temptation that it seemed as if his mouth would utter unforgivable words on its own. He then felt the need to “clap my hand under my chin, to hold my mouth from opening,” or to dive head first into a “muck hole” to prevent his mouth from speaking (§ 103). The powerful compulsion to sin, running in his thoughts “a hundred times together,” (§ 136) was for Bunyan, an unconscious, somewhat paradoxical attempt to resolve the fear of eternal condemnation. He reasoned that, by wilfully committing the unpardonable sin, (blaspheming God and rejecting salvation) he would no longer need to fear that he might inadvertently do so. Of



course this attempt was also unsuccessful in that he was unable to consciously carry it out. In fact his efforts to resist selling Christ then became a new obsession and he developed a new set of compulsive behaviours (similar to catatonia or to tics as in Tourette's syndrome) to combat this obsession, "standing as continually leaning," "pushing or thrusting with my hands or elbows," and repeating more than twenty times the words "No, no, no, not for thousands..." (§137-139).

As Bunyan's condition grew worse in the persistence of his obsessions and compulsions, his thinking became clouded with the kind of cognitive distortions that modern day theorists say often results in depression. For example, Bunyan noted that he came to believe that a scripture passage (Luke 14:22-23) had been written specifically for him to relieve his distress. There is evidence as well of double binds in his thoughts, as he wrote that, though he knew that prayer was the only way he could approach Christ, he could not because doing so would compound his guilt. Bunyan also found great comfort in knowing that the scriptures were infallible, that Christ's promises were true, even though he believed that their truth and infallibility condemned him. Bunyan recognized the irrationality of his thinking as he noted that others would see the conclusions he came to as ridiculous (§ 184). A delusion or possibly an auditory hallucination is described in paragraphs 93 and 94 where Bunyan heard the words of a scripture passage as if called out by someone some considerable distance behind him. He also once had a sense of urgency to pray to the devil and on other occasions to pray to various objects (a bush, a bull, or a broom).

This obsessive, tormented and irrational thinking drove Bunyan to despair and into a deep depression. He experienced the onset of his first bout of depression when, because

of his ‘wicked thoughts and desires,’ he lost hope. “My desires also for heaven and life began to fail” he wrote (§ 77), and his discouragements “laid (him) as low as hell” (§ 78). He described his state of hopelessness as being “like a man bereft of life” (§ 140), and his suicidal ideation is apparent in these words, “now was I a burden and a terror to myself, nor did I ever so know, as now, what it was to be weary of my life and yet afraid to die” (§ 149). Later he wrote, “despair was swallowing me up,” and he could then “neither stand nor go, nor lie either at quiet or at rest” (§ 163 & 165). Eventually, weighed down and depressed by his load of sin, he apparently perceived that the sun begrudged to give him light, and the stones and roof tiles reproached him and bent away from him. Indeed, Bunyan’s depression was deep and powerful.

### ***Bunyan’s Recovery***

OCD is generally considered to be a chronic illness and complete cure is most unusual, although as noted above, lengthy or even complete remissions do occur when patients have the more episodic sub-type of OCD. Treatment approaches to OCD today typically involve the use of anti-depressant medications along with cognitive-behaviour therapy involving relaxation together with exposure and response prevention strategies (Jenike, 2001). Cognitive approaches such as habituation wherein the patient is paradoxically directed to encourage the obsessional idea, and thought-stopping (performing some behaviour that is incompatible with the obsession, such as yelling the word “stop!” or snapping a rubber band worn on the wrist) are commonly used today. Remarkably, Bunyan attempted similar approaches when he voiced the paradoxical temptation to sell Christ, when he continued singing Psalm 51, and when he repeatedly

yelled “No, no, no, not for a thousand” to stop the thought of selling Christ. Of course, these self-help remedies were not at all successful in Bunyan’s case.

Bunyan does apparently overcome the debilitating effects of the obsessions and compulsions that had gripped him. Although in *Grace Abounding* he does make reference to some later periods of anxiety (§266, 277), doubt (§268, 336), discouragement (§292), and self-deprecation (§296), it seems that the intensity and crippling effect of these experiences are no longer present. What then did lead to his eventual recovery, where his proclivity towards anxiety no longer held him captive?

For John Bunyan, the process of becoming a Christian was also a process of becoming a reader. As *Grace Abounding* clearly demonstrates, Scripture is the site of his compulsions and torments early on, but it is also, eventually, the source of his greatest comfort. Bunyan’s later productivity as a writer and preacher attest to the fact that comfort wins out over compulsion, and Bunyan is released from his most debilitating trials. Just how this happens, however, remains something of a mystery in *Grace Abounding*. Fortunately, *Grace Abounding* may not be the only place where Bunyan gives his readers a glimpse at the nature and occasion of his release from the threat of despair. In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, and specifically in the episode at the Castle of Giant Despair, we gain some insights about how compulsive scripture reading is transformed into a “saving reading” of scripture for Bunyan.

### ***Bunyan as Reader***

In her study of Bunyan as reader, Maxine Hancock (2000) chronicles the development that takes Bunyan from a proficiency for understanding the basic sense of a passage, to a sophisticated set of skills that allow him to read figuratively and literally, typologically

and allegorically--in brief, to read in as many ways as the text and the circumstances dictate. As Hancock observes, *Grace Abounding* chronicles a three-part process that moves Bunyan from the “plain sense of a passage, to an ability to read thematically for the ‘new testament stile and sense,’ . . . and toward a third and final step wherein Bunyan marshals his full repertoire of sophisticated interpretative abilities to accomplish a ‘harmonization of texts’” (Hancock, 2000, p. 32). In this final stage Bunyan seeks to reconcile apparent doctrinal and thematic contradictions among the various biblical books within one large, all-embracing and comprehensive Christian account.

*Grace Abounding* records the pain and anguish Bunyan experiences as he attempts to build a harmonized account of salvation that is big enough to include himself. Bunyan’s recollection of the change that brings about this release is typical in its brevity and vagueness. About the battles with Scriptures that caused doubt he says:

I was greatly beaten off my former foolish practice, of putting by the word of promise when it came into my mind. . . formerly I thought I might not meddle with the Promise, unless I felt its comfort. . . now. . . I was glad to catch at that word, which yet I feared I had no ground nor right to own: and even to leap into the bosom of that Promise (Bunyan, 2004, ¶ 248-249).

What precisely he means by “leaping into the Promise,” and how he managed to do it, remain unexplained. What we can gather is that Bunyan becomes active in the acquisition of his certainty. Rather than waiting for the promise in his own bosom to give him comfort, he reverses the direction of the action and seeks to place himself, indeed, throw himself, into the Promise.

*Grace Abounding* provides little other evidence to clarify how Bunyan's compulsive, repetitious readings of scripture give way to spiritual and psychological peace, but *The Pilgrim's Progress* does. In this story we meet another character, Christian, that, like Bunyan, is tempted to despair. Christian also finds peace eventually. What happens to Christian is, therefore, of some interest to those of us who hope to unravel the mystery of Bunyan's recovery.

### ***Christian as Reader***

In the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress* Bunyan's main character is also a developing reader. Bunyan spends a good deal of time and care charting out the ways and means of Christian's developing literacy and hermeneutical abilities. The progress through the three-part sequential development that Maxine Hancock observes in Bunyan's own reading is also evident in the dialogues that occur as Christian and his companions make their way toward the celestial city. In the scene where Christian and Hopeful see the pillar of Lots' wife, for example, we see the actual decoding of written words as Christian helps Hopeful to achieve the first step in reading by the "laying of letters together" (Bunyan, 1984, p.89). Other episodes show Christian's competence at achieving the "new testament stile" and sense of various passages. In the encounter with Talkative, for example, we witness the results of Faithful's and Christian's more sophisticated levels of reading competence. When Faithful refers to Moses's law regarding unclean animals who "part the hoof" or "chew the cud" but "not both" he cites the text as an analogue for Talkative's tendency to be a speaker of the word but not a "doer" (Bunyan, 1984, p.66). Following their encounter, Christian commends Faithful for his insightful reading of Talkative's case, and comments that he has "spoken . . . the

true Gospel sense of those texts”(Bunyan, 1984, p.66). The best example of the third type of reading, where a harmonization of contradictory scriptural passages occurs, takes place at Doubting Castle, the home of Giant Despair.<sup>2</sup> In this part of the story we are given the sharpest insight into the mechanisms and processes of Christian’s and, perhaps, Bunyan’s own release from compulsive readings and depression.

### *Easter at Doubting Castle*

Throughout this section of the story Bunyan uses the days of the week to mark out events in both the text itself and in the margin. The significance of this designation is first apparent in the fact that this is the only part of the story where the days are labelled at all. The comparison Bunyan makes here between the events at Doubting Castle and the Easter story is very subtle. No doubt, it has largely escaped comment because Bunyan’s mapping of the Easter events dispenses with the more usual liturgical frame that begins with Maundy Thursday, and he leaves it to his readers to discover by calculation that the escape from the Castle actually takes place early on the Sunday morning. The Easter story, as it is recorded in the synoptic gospels, however, makes Bunyan’s enigmatic choice of the Wednesday as the first day of the pilgrim’s captivity clear: in three of the four gospels, Judas’ bargain to betray Jesus is discussed immediately before the events of Maundy Thursday. In the Gospel of St. Luke, chapter 22, we are explicitly told that Judas’ arrangement with the chief priests is made on the day before the Passover meal, the “last supper” on the Thursday, the night of Jesus’ arrest. Thus, according to an analogical<sup>3</sup> reading of both Luke 22 and of the Giant Despair episode, it is on the Wednesday that “Hope” is betrayed into the hands of “Despair.” The head note in the Geneva Bible provides another important clue to the significance that this scriptural event

had for Bunyan himself. The pithy summation of the action at the head of the chapter encapsulates the words of one of Bunyan's own temptations: "Judas selleth Christ" (Geneva, 1602/1989, see Luke XXII). Therefore, in terms of both the Scriptural account and Bunyan's imagination, Thursday's events simply record the outcomes of a decision made the day before. Bunyan's subtle realignment of the story from the more usual liturgically orthodox parameters for the passion weekend places the emphasis of the account on the principle characters' intent, not the outcomes of action in both narratives. Judas betrays Jesus when he covenants with the Chief Priest. He does so intentionally. In Bunyan's story, however, although it is "through Christian's unadvised haste" (p.92) that the two travellers are brought to the Castle grounds, Christian makes it clear to Hopeful that he is sorry to have brought him out of the way. "I did not do it," says Christian, "of an evil intent" (p.92). Christian, unlike Judas, soon repents of his error; he asks for and is granted Hopeful's forgiveness. Thus, while Judas' fate is sealed as an unregenerate on the Wednesday, Christian is still clearly operating within the providential plan for redemption.

The betrayal on the Wednesday leads to an extended anti-Passover on the following four days when the pilgrims are beaten and denied food and water. Goaded by his wife, Mistress Diffidence, in a manner that Robert Collmer (1997) likens to the "pillow talk" that is exchanged between Pilate and his wife, the Giant carries out an increasingly gruesome series of trials for the prisoners. The Friday marks the most significant temptation: the Giant advises the pilgrims to kill themselves. Although they resist, the alignment of the threat with the day of the crucifixion makes imaginative sense. The Saturday is spent among the bones in the Castle yard, a hell of sorts, and therefore

parallels the Saturday that Christ spent in Hell before his resurrection. Finally, Sunday marks a literal and figurative return to life for Christ as well as for the pilgrims. This allegorical patterning signals the immense significance of the events that occur at the castle. Bunyan represents the escape from the clutches of Despair as an escape from hell, and the beginning of a new life. The mechanism of this escape is, therefore, especially important to our understanding of Christian's and, perhaps, Bunyan's release from psychological and spiritual despair.

The first, most obvious, point made about how Christian triumphs over Despair is that he has Hopeful at his side throughout. In this episode, Hopeful becomes a counsellor to Christian. He is the empathetic listener, and the provider of wise advice. Hopeful's role in this segment of the story makes perfect sense in terms of the theology that it represents. Hope is, according to Calvin, a variety of applied faith, or faith in action. In the *Institutes*, Calvin (1960) refers to hope as "the nourishment and strength of faith" (bk.3, ch.2, sect.43). At Despair's castle, Hopeful does put his faith in action: his good counsel is the most immediate cause of Christian's resistance to the Giant's temptations. Early Sunday morning when Christian remembers the key, the promise, that will open any lock in Doubting Castle, it is Hopeful who once again exhorts Christian to move: "pluck it out of thy bosom," he says "and try" (p.96).

This injunction to use the key, the Scriptural Promise, echoes Bunyan's observation about his own experience in *Grace Abounding*. Bunyan grew to understand that he ought not to wait for the promise within to provide feelings of comfort, but rather to "pluck" the promise out of the bosom and "leap" into it so that it might do him good. Interestingly, this injunction to claim actively and use Scripture promises is exactly the procedure



advocated by *The Westminster Confession* (1690/1988) to all Bible Christians who seek to make the word “effectual to salvation.” In its answer to Question 90 in the Shorter Catechism, *The Confession* outlines a three-part process: The Question asks: “How is the word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?” The answer given reads “That the word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts and practise it in our lives [emphasis our own].” The first proof text listed for this doctrine is Proverbs 8:34 “Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates.”

A close look at the episode in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* suggests that Bunyan seems to have a similar three-step vision of escape from the Castle of Despair. In this case, the gates behind which Christian and Hopeful are trapped dramatize how the hopeful application of the promises allows release from all three of the locks that stand between the characters and the experience of liberation promised in the catechetical response. As they apply the three principles outlined in question 90, the locks begin to open in sequence. At the moment when Christian’s and Hopeful’s diligence and preparation are coupled with their prayer at midnight on the Saturday, they are able to hear the word in a saving way, and they discover the key to the locks. The first of these opens easily, just as receiving the word is easy for both Bunyan and Christian. The second lock is likewise easy, just as the effort to memorize and otherwise “lay up” scripture in their bosom is something that competent, developing readers like Bunyan and Christian both appear to do readily. But the last locked gate, the matter of putting scripture into active practice, of making faith active in hope, is another matter. This gate is “damnable” hard for Christian,

just as it had been for Bunyan himself. With application, however, this final gate opens too, although noisily, and the two escape with Despair in hot pursuit.

Although the Pilgrims are saved by their faith, they must root their salvation in God and in the Scriptural promises, rather than their own experience, before they are able to feel the saving grace promised to them. In this way, the events at Doubting Castle serve as a gloss to the oblique comment about “leaping into” the promise that concludes *Grace Abounding*. As Christian and Hopeful’s experiences suggest, this matter of jumping into the promises is “damnable hard,” and it is only possible when one keeps hope by his or her side. Christian and Hopeful have to use the key--to place faith in the Scriptural promises. Or, to express it another way, they have to place their faith in the hopeful reading. The final step in the reading process, the business of harmonizing conflicting scriptural evidence regarding election and reprobation, is accomplished by staking a claim for the scripture reading that sustains hope.

What we discover next in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is that the decision to use the promise, to practice hope, is not a once-and-for-all-choice. The need to ground oneself in scripture continues: there is, after all, a path that leads directly back to Doubting Castle from the Delectable Mountains. The story also indicates, however, that once Christian has learned how to rely upon hope, his journey forward is much more comfortable. As we soon discover, the lesson learned at the Castle does come in handy again. When he feels himself drowning as he crosses the River of Life, Christian calls out to Hopeful who literally keeps Christian’s head above water during the crossing to the Celestial city. In this final part of the story, Bunyan takes the opportunity to drive home his point one more time. Hopeful says to Christian:

These troubles and distresses that you go thorough in these Waters, are no sign that God hath forsaken you, but are sent to try you, whether you will call to mind that which heretofore you have received of his goodness, and live upon him in your distresses (p.129).

Once again, Hopeful exhorts Christian to put his faith in action, to hope in the promises. He gives Christian the text, and before long it is effective. Christian's confidence, his saving reading of the text, is restored.

Once Bible readers like Christian and Bunyan have fully developed their repertoire of reading strategies they are able to produce a multiplicity of interpretations for any given passage. In this third and final stage of the reading process, the exercise becomes one of selection among possible readings, rather than of waiting for yet another text or interpretation to add to the mix. At the conclusion of *Grace Abounding* Bunyan has learned to select the "saving reading"; he has learned to claim the promise and apply it to himself. In this way, the inertia that plagues so many Calvinist Christians like Bunyan is mitigated with a thoroughly orthodox remedy. It is by faith and faith alone that one is saved, but one must work to nourish and strengthen that faith by exercising hope.

And so *The Pilgrim's Progress* sheds light on the matter of Bunyan's transformation from the despair so clearly evidenced in *Grace Abounding*. Bunyan's irrational and obsessive fears and his desperately compulsive readings of scripture contributed to his dark despair at the outset, but his gradual developing proficiencies as a reader, and his practice of faith in hope eventually bring him and his Christian pilgrim to a place of sustained health by way of Easter at Doubting Castle. No longer are his perceptions clouded and his thoughts paralyzed with doubts. Bunyan's progress towards a clear

understanding and acceptance of God's grace, like Christian's, opens his mind to real hope and thus to spiritual and psychological health.

Bunyan's experiences, both in his suffering and in his eventual recovery, demonstrate the dynamic interaction of his psychological state and his spiritual maturation. When his reading of scripture finally provided comfort and hope, his anxieties and despair concerning his salvation quieted. His faith then promoted an obedient and faithful response (hope in action) and he experienced a transformation towards wholeness, or at least towards a remission of his obsessive thoughts and compulsive rituals. No longer, it seems, did his anxiety prevent him from experiencing the saving grace of Christ. In this experience there is hope for others who suffer the torment of obsessive compulsive anxiety and despair. Psychological disturbance can make God seem awfully far away, His grace seem unavailable. In this, hope is lost and despair sets in. As Bunyan's life attests, hope, conveyed to a sufferer in the context of a caring, loving relationship, is a primary ingredient in psychological therapy that can make a world of difference between deepening despair and healing.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>It is common practice among Bunyan scholars to cite all quotations from *Grace Abounding* by paragraph rather than by page number.

<sup>2</sup>There are several episodes in *The Pilgrim's Progress* that take up issues of depression-like experiences, such as Christian's struggle with the slough of Despond and his encounter with the man in the iron cage. George Butler (1987) takes up theological issues surrounding the man in the iron cage and argues that the man in the cage has committed the "unpardonable sin" by failing to ask forgiveness. The differences between despair and despond are important. Despond, which according to the Oxford Concise Dictionary, is a word that arises in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, is by definition a lesser case of despair. "Despond" means to become dejected and lose confidence, while "despair" is the complete loss or absence of *hope*. It is significant to this discussion that the word "despond" derives from the Latin *de* "away" and *spondere* "to promise"—literally the act of moving away from the promise. "Despair" derives from the Latin *de* and *sperare* "to hope"—and therefore signifies the act of moving away from hope.

<sup>3</sup>The difference here between an allegorical and anagogical reading is slight, but important. According to the O.E.D., Tindale (1528) is among the earliest English writers to employ the term "anagogical" to distinguish between readings that are appropriate to faith, and those that are appropriate to hope. According to Tindale, "They divide the scripture into four senses, the literal, tropological, allegorical and anagogical...the allegory is appropriate to faith, and the anagogical to hope and things above."

## References

- American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Washington, D.C.
- Brink, A. (1975). Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress and the secular reader: A psychological approach. *English Studies in Canada*, 1(4), 386-405.
- Bunyan, J. (2004). *Grace abounding to the chief of sinners*. Thornton, J.F. & Varenne, S.B. (Eds.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Bunyan, J. (1984). *The pilgrim's progress*, part one. In N. H. Keeble (Ed.). *Oxford World Classics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, George. (1987) The iron cage of despair and 'the unpardonable sin' in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. *ELN (English Language Notes)*, 25, 34-38.
- Calvin, J. (1960). *Institutes of the Christian religion*. In J. T. McNeill (Ed., F. L. Battles, Trans.). Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- Camden, V. (2002). 'That of Esau': Hebrews xii.16, 17 in *Grace Abounding*. In N. H. Keeble (Ed.). *John Bunyan: Reading dissenting writing*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Collmer, R. (1997). Mistress Diffidence: Her arrival in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In B. Ewell & M. McKay (Eds.). *Performance for a lifetime: A festschrift honouring Dorothy Harrell Brown: Essays on women, religion and the Renaissance* (pp. 195-204). New Orleans: Loyola University Press.
- Geneva Bible: Annotated New Testament. (1989). G. Sheppard (Ed.). New York: The Pilgrim's Press. (Reprinted from the Geneva Bible, 1602).
- Greaves, R.L. (2002). *Glimpses of glory: John Bunyan and English dissent*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Hancock, M. (2000). *Key in the window: Marginal notes in Bunyan's narratives*.  
Vancouver: Regent Press.
- Jenike, M.A. (2001). An update on obsessive-compulsive disorder. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, 65 (1), 4 – 25.
- Leudar, I., & Sharrock, W. (2002a). The cases of John Bunyan. Part 1. Taine and Royce. *History of Psychiatry*, 13, 247-265.
- Leudar, I., & Sharrock, W. (2002b). The cases of John Bunyan. Part 2. James and Janet. *History of Psychiatry*, 13, 401-417.
- Masellis, M., Rechter, N.A., & Richter, M.A. (2003). Quality of life in OCD: Differential impact of obsessions, compulsions, and depressive comorbidity. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 48, 72-77.
- Oxenham, S. (2001) 'That I may tye myself under mine own handwriting': Reading and writing salvation in the diaries of Oliver Heywood and Issac Archer. *Bunyan Studies*, 10, 65-83.
- Ravizza, L., Maina, G., & Bogetto, F. (1997). Episodic and chronic obsessive-compulsive disorder. *Depression and Anxiety*, 6, 154-158.
- Samuels, J., & Nestadt, G. Epidemiology and genetics of obsessive-compulsive disorder. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 9 (1). Retrieved June 15, 2004 from the World Wide Web <http://web18.epnet.com/citation.asp?b=1...mpulsive++disorder+26CB&cf=1&fn=21&rn=26>.
- Stranahan, B.P. (1981). Bunyan's special talent: Biblical texts as 'events' in *Grace Abounding and The Pilgrim's Progress*. *English Literary Renaissance*, 11(3), 329-343.

Tindale, William (1528) The Obedience of a Christian Man. Antwerp: Martin de Keyser.

Tynes, L.L., & Winstead, D.K. (1999). Subtyping obsessive compulsive patients by depressive symptoms: A retrospective pilot study. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 70(1), 53-61.

Westminster Confession of Faith. (1988). Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications.  
(Reprinted from the Westminster Confession, 1690).



### Authors

John Sneep (Ph.D. in Counselling Psychology, University of Alberta, 1989) is an Associate professor of psychology at The King's University College in Edmonton, Alberta. Dr. Sneep's research interest is spiritual and psychological transformation. In his clinical work with individuals, couples and families he uses cognitive, brief therapy, and family systems approaches.

Arlette Zinck (Ph.D. in English Literature, University of Alberta, 1993) is an Associate Professor of English at The King's University College, Edmonton, Alberta. She is a co-editor of *Awakening Words: John Bunyan and the Language of Community* (Delaware, 2000). She and Dr, John Sneep have worked collaboratively on several projects involving 17th Century spiritual autobiographies.