John Bunyan lived during a century filled with civil, religious, and cultural strife. The previous chapter on Lilburne attests to the implications of political dissent. As a result of the political and religious revolutions of the seventeenth century, the period is full of prison literature written from a variety of viewpoints and positions within society. As political systems and power structures shifted—from monarchy to republic and back to monarchy, or from a national church to relative religious independence and toleration then back to a tightly regulated national church—people who found their fortunes reversed by the cultural upheaval were forced to make sense of the existential crisis of lost agency. For example, King Charles I wrote a prison narrative, *Eikon Basilike*, in which he sought to justify his divinely authorized kingship while facing the government’s executioner. Furthermore, Richard Lovelace, an imprisoned courtier and poet who supported the losing side in the English Civil Wars, wrote the lines, “Stones walls do not a prison make, / Nor iron bars a cage.”¹ John Milton also penned a prison drama, *Samson Agonistes*. None of their writings, however, proved as popular as those of John Bunyan.

Although he was born in Bedfordshire, England, in 1628, removed from the politics of London, Bunyan did not live a tranquil or uneventful life. The cultural tensions of the day soon enveloped him as he came to age during the English Civil Wars. Shortly after the death of his mother in 1644, Bunyan enlisted in the army to serve his nation; however, history has not recorded whether Bunyan fought for the King or for Parliament.²

Surviving the war, Bunyan returned home to begin his careers—as a layman as well as a minister—during the height of the Puritan Revolution. Even
though the administration of church and state remained closely tied together in the seventeenth century, the period between the death of King Charles I (1649) and the Restoration of his son King Charles II (1660)—the commonwealth period dominated by the rule of Oliver Cromwell—was a time of sporadic regulation and functional religious toleration as long as one’s beliefs were Protestant. Numerous nonconforming or sectarian religious groups arose as theological beliefs, political views, and economic values splintered the more or less unified national Protestant church of the early seventeenth century. Among these religious factions were some very conservative groups, such as the Presbyterians, who retained an authoritarian ecclesiastical structure based on elders rather than bishops, and the Independents, who agreed with the Calvinist theological tenets of the Presbyterians but rejected their church government and therefore met in independently “gathered” congregations. Also arising during these years were the Regular and General Baptists, who took issue with some of the traditional ceremonies within the English church. More radical groups also emerged. The Quakers, who were formed during these years, were considered to be extremely radical because of their refusal to take oaths, whether to king, state, or the establishment church. Other, now obscure, radical groups like the Ranters or Fifth Monarchists took advantage of the lax regulations of the press and fewer ecclesiastical penal laws in order to spread their apocalyptic political agenda of establishing the millennium of Christ’s rule on earth.

Bunyan, a self-admitted reprobate and sinner during his youth, experienced his religious conversion during these years. Like many other religious converts during this day, Bunyan was faced with conflicting worldviews that were represented in robust polemical debates fueled by a relatively unrestrained printing industry. By 1653, Bunyan found himself as a member of a moderate nonconformist congregation that met in St. John’s Church, in Bedford, England, where he served as a deacon and eventually as an ordained minister.

Nonconformist is a name encompassing a broad group of religious sects. They were Protestant Christians who rejected or dissented from the established church based on religious conviction—often referred to as matters of conscience. Reasons for nonconformity ranged from disagreements over church government—that is, whether to use bishops and the Episcopal structure bequeathed by the Roman Catholic Church or to use a body of ordained elders or to allow local congregations to rule themselves. Alternately, nonconformity could be based on disagreements over the liturgy of church services—that is, whether to use prescribed ceremonies, ornaments, and furniture or to reduce worship down to a basic emphasis on the word of God. Some nonconformists rejected the establishment wholesale, and some rejected only small parts of it. Bunyan’s nonconformist congregation was a gathered church that rejected the established ecclesiastical hierarchy as well as its prescribed extrabiblical liturgical service.