

## Britain Founder Story—John Biddle

The person most frequently called the “father of English Unitarianism” was a man named John Biddle who lived from 1615 to 1662. Biddle was a well educated man: he attended public school in his home town and received two degrees from Oxford. His first career was as a schoolmaster in the city of Gloucester, where people looked up to him for his hard work and his respect for others.

During those years, Biddle became very interested in the study of theology, the nature of God. He did not study this in school, rather he read the Bible and studied other theological writings on his own. The growing use of the newly-invented printing press in the first half of the 1500s meant Bibles were mass-produced, so and more and more people were reading the Bible on their own and making their own interpretations.

Biddle was particularly interested in the idea of the Holy Spirit. At that time the official Christian church doctrine was that God was in three parts—God the father, God the Son (Jesus, or Christ), and God the Holy Spirit. God seen in this three-part way is known as the Trinity. But Biddle found no evidence of a three-part God in the Bible. He came to believe that there was no divine Holy Spirit.

In those days, holding a belief that went against the church was heresy, a very serious legal and moral offence. People were arrested and often could even be burned at the stake for speaking such beliefs. Biddle not only talked openly about his beliefs, he wrote them down in a short manuscript called the “Twelve Arguments.” In it, he quoted passages from the Bible that he thought proved his point. When a friend betrayed Biddle by showing his manuscript to the authorities, Biddle was promptly arrested and thrown into jail.

Biddle had enough money to pay his bail and be released after a short time. But his luck ran out a few years later when, after publishing his “Twelve Arguments” and a couple other manuscripts declaring there was one God, he was called to explain his views before parliament. His writings were taken away to be burned, and he was thrown into prison once again. But the debate caused an internal fight between members of parliament which saved Biddle this time. Some members (those who supported the king’s view) wanted heretics like Biddle be put to death. Others, including the army leaders and the independent members of parliament argued against such extreme measures. After the death of the King Charles I, the more moderate forces won out, and Biddle was released.

Biddle continued to write at his home in Staffordshire, and he began to preach there to a growing number of followers. The new government, under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell, relaxed its opposition to reformers like Biddle, and soon he was holding regular Sunday worship services. His followers were called Biddlelians, or Socinians, or Unitarians, a term his friend Henry Hedworth learned from a Transylvanian Unitarian. And that is how it happened that the congregation Biddle started was known as the first Unitarian church in England.

Biddle’s story does not end there. He was not long left in peace. For the remaining ten years of his life he was in and out of prison depending on the whims of the parliament and the support or opposition of powerful politicians. In 1662, he was arrested and unable to pay the fine: he was sentenced to prison where he died of fever.