

CHRISTIAN'S CONVERSATION: A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON JOHN BUNYAN'S *PILGRIM'S PROGRESS*

by Lane Keister

Introduction

WHEN IS CHRISTIAN A CHRISTIAN? To many people it may seem quite obvious: when Christian enters the Wicket Gate. To others, it may seem equally obvious: when Christian arrives at the empty tomb. Scholars have taken both positions in the past. Derek Thomas, for example, holds that Christian is converted at the Wicket Gate and receives assurance at the empty tomb.¹ While much in the text would support this position, there are some difficulties, such as the multiple pictures of justification given at the empty tomb, which would seem to go beyond descriptions of assurance, as we will see.

On the other hand, some scholars hold that Christian was converted at the empty tomb.² Again, while having much that could support such a reading, it does not tend to do justice to the descriptions of the Wicket Gate being the gate for the sheep, Jesus Christ himself. I therefore wish to propose a new solution to the question. I propose that the Wicket Gate represents regeneration and the beginning of sanctification, which is further developed at the Interpreter's House, and that the empty tomb represents justification and the resulting assurance that comes from it. In other words, from the Wicket Gate to the end of the empty tomb scene is one unified conversion narrative of Christian.³

1. See Derek Thomas, unpublished lectures on *Pilgrim's Progress*, Ligonier Ministries. See also Sharon Lei, "To 'Make a Travailer of Thee': a Study of John Bunyan's Pastoral Theology with Particular Focus on Assurance" (PhD thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2002), 147. This is also Barry Horner's position in *Pilgrim's Progress: Themes and Issues* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2003), 123–42.

2. See Galen Johnson, "Prisoner of Conscience: John Bunyan on Subjectivism, Individualism, and Christian Faith" (unpublished PhD thesis, Baylor University, 2002), 174.

3. John James argues that the sequence includes eight steps. See his article, "Tortuous and Complicated: An Analysis of Conversion in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*" *Foundations* 67 (Nov. 2014), 43–59, esp. 44–48. The process of conversion certainly seems to involve more

In the minds of many, the narrative sequence is too long to describe such a thing as a complex of events grouped around conversion and what comes from it. However, in narrative time, the entirety of the sequence from Wicket Gate to the empty tomb only takes up seven pages.⁴ In order to prove the position, a fair bit of digging must happen in Bunyan's other works, specifically in the autobiographical work *Grace Abounding*, to seek to map Bunyan's own conversion to becoming a Christian. Most scholars agree that Part One of *Pilgrim's Progress* is autobiographical.⁵ Other works will also shed light on the question, specifically *The Strait Gate*, and his treatment of justification.⁶ While difficulties will still persist (not least of which is seeking to interpret an allegorical work responsibly!), there is too much evidence of conversion-type language at both the Wicket Gate and the empty tomb not to consider the possibility that Bunyan saw conversion as a short process beginning with regeneration and ending with justification.⁷ The scope of the inquiry will need to include more than the actual scenes themselves.

There is valuable information later in Part One, as Christian retells his story to others. Even Part Two, Christiana's story, will have some things to contribute. First, I will raise the question of Puritan accounts of conversion and the Christian life, seeking to place Bunyan's self-accounts into the larger historical context of how the Puritans talked about themselves. Then, I will consider the evidence from the scenes of the Wicket Gate through the empty tomb. Then, I will proceed to the rest of Part 1

than the Wicket Gate. However, his steps 1–6 are not really part of conversion (conviction of sin does not automatically lead to regeneration), and he analyzes the empty tomb as assurance instead of justification. Pieter de Vries is certainly on better ground when he calls the steps before the Wicket Gate the “general work” of the Holy Spirit. See de Vries, *John Bunyan on the Order of Salvation*, trans. C. Van Haaften (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 126.

4. In the edition I am using, the entirety of *Pilgrim's Progress* takes up 165 pages. Still, even with the large pages, only the Interpreter's House comes in between the Wicket Gate and the empty tomb.

5. Good short biographies of John Bunyan abound. See, for example, Robert Oliver, “Grace Abounding: Imputed Righteousness in the Life and Work of John Bunyan,” *Churchman* 107.1 (1993). For more information on the publication history of *Pilgrim's Progress*, Beeke, Joel, R., and Paul M. Smalley, *John Bunyan and the Grace of Fearing God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016), 1–30. However, see Michael Davies, *Graceful Reading: Theology and Narrative in the Works of John Bunyan* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 177–8 for a strong challenge to the idea that *Grace Abounding* can be easily mapped to *Pilgrim's Progress* as Bunyan's autobiography. One does not have to agree with the strength of Davies's statement to agree that such correlations are indeed secondary to doctrine in *Pilgrim's Progress* (179). Owen Watkins's attempt to do such mapping is generally convincing: “John Bunyan and His Experience,” in *Puritan Papers, Volume One*, edited J. I. Packer (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), 129–39.

6. All references to Bunyan's works will be to the Banner of Truth three-volume edition reprinted in 1999 from the 1854 edition by Blackie and Son.

7. None of what I argue should be taken to suggest that Bunyan was confusing the boundary between justification and sanctification. I am merely noting their inseparability. For Bunyan's clear distinction between justification and sanctification, see Anjov Ahenakaa, “Justification and the Christian Life in John Bunyan: A Vindication of John Bunyan From the Charge of Antinomianism” (unpublished PhD thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1997), 190–245.

of the allegory, followed by Part 2. I will seek to fit in the relevant parts of *Grace Abounding, The Strait Gate*, and his short pieces on justification as I go along. This will also be my method with the secondary literature.

How Puritans Talked About Themselves

Kathleen Swain has an insightful analysis of this topic in her book *Pilgrim's Progress, Puritan Progress*.⁸ Swain argues, "They continuously sought to interread the Bible and the largest patterns and smallest details of their lives on the assumption that the Word and experience were reciprocally illuminating" (135). The pattern of conversion was a progression "from sin to grace" (136). Soul-searching anguish is not uncommon in these kinds of narratives since the convert must be on alert for false security (139). Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* certainly fits this mold. Bunyan details his agony of self-examination, constantly careening between assurance and doubt (usually with Scripture providing the basis for both the assurance and the doubt!). After five or six iterations of this oscillation, Bunyan finally comes down on the side of assurance. This finds an echo in *Pilgrim's Progress*.

As Swain puts it, "In the opening half Christian repeatedly details his sinful past in a series of loops that serve for recapitulation and reflection. . . . Each stage adds details and re-presents more and more earlier data in a widening circle of progressively interpreted and redesigned retelling" (149–50). It is quite challenging to pinpoint a time in *Grace Abounding* when Bunyan would confidently say he was a converted Christian. His wife's possession of Lewis Bayly's book *The Practice of Piety* and Arthur Dent's book *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* (see *Grace Abounding*, paragraph 15) did not mark a conversion after he read them since his comment is that he "met with no conviction." That he does not see conversion as happening by paragraph 30 is plain from the words "outward reformation" in that paragraph. The most likely location in the discourse is paragraphs 54–55, wherein he describes his entrance into a strait doorway, which he describes using the name of Jesus Christ as the door itself.⁹ However, his lack of assurance is so significant in the following paragraphs that he does not believe he is converted (especially paragraphs 73 and 76). This might indicate some confusion on Bunyan's part between conversion and assurance, as if to be converted was the same as being certain of it.¹⁰ Alternatively, and more plausibly, this phenomenon could simply be a lack of precision on Bunyan's part, referring more to what he was feeling at the time, as opposed to a theological analysis of what actually happened. Michael Davies's analysis suggests that *Grace Abounding* follows the pattern of moving from law to grace, especially from "the covenant of law and works (according to the terms of Bunyan's covenant theology) to

8. Kathleen Swain, *Pilgrim's Progress, Puritan Progress: Discourses and Contexts* (Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 132–59.

9. In this respect, comparing these two paragraphs with his work *The Strait Gate*, written only two years before *Pilgrim's Progress*, leads to a more firm conclusion. See especially his epistle to the reader, wherein he states that his discourse is "directly about the saving or damning of the soul" (see *Works*, I, 363). Entering the gate means salvation for Bunyan.

10. For an opposing view, see Lei, 144–7.

the liberty offered by a covenant of grace, faith in which brings blessed release for Bunyan from incarcerating fears and doubts.”¹¹ In any case, there can be little doubt that much of the agonized soul-searching corresponds to the Slough of Despond. Here, care must be taken to remember that, even though *Pilgrim's Progress* is certainly autobiographical, the order of events in the work does not have to correspond precisely with Bunyan's own experience since Bunyan was obviously attempting to make his own experience relevant for his readers. Indeed, a great deal of the agony of *Grace Abounding* happens after Bunyan actually became a Christian, whereas the Slough of Despond occurs before the Wicket Gate. Doubting Castle is the other prominent place to locate some of Bunyan's agony in the allegory. It seems to me that there is much more soul-searching in *Grace Abounding* than there is for Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Likewise, the language of feeling predominates in *Grace Abounding*, whereas a more theological description of what happens in a Christian's life is characteristic of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The Scenes in *Pilgrim's Progress*

For our purposes, the most relevant parts of the allegory are the Wicket Gate, the Interpreter's House, and the empty tomb. Before Christian gets to the Wicket Gate, he has already had two major bouts with doubts: the Slough of Despond and the encounter with Mr. Worldly Wiseman. The former represents a sinner's despair that he could not be saved, and the latter represents all ways of seeking to get rid of guilt by law-keeping. Christian must be helped out of both scrapes, the former by the character Help and the latter by no less than the Evangelist himself.

When Christian approaches the Wicket Gate, there are many indications that this is the beginning of his Christian walk. The quotation from Matthew 7:8, “Knock, and it shall be opened unto you,” opens the scene and controls all that happens. The poem Christian utters speaks of his rebellion in the past tense: “though I have been an undeserving rebel?” (96) The gatekeeper, Good-will, gives Christian a pull as he walks through the gate. The narrative reason for this pull is that Beelzebub shoots arrows at travelers, seeking to kill them before they can enter. However, when placed next to the full-hearted willingness of Good-will to let Christian in, it bears the aspect of God's prevenient grace in drawing sinners to Himself. Christian's comment on hearing that the open door will not be shut is that he begins “to reap the benefits of my hazards” (97). This sounds like the beginning of salvation.

Good-will frames the allowance of people into the Way in the following manner: “We make no objections against any, notwithstanding all that they have done before they come hither. They are ‘in no wise cast out,’” a quotation from John 6:37. This quotation makes Good-will an allegorical representation of Jesus Christ. The first part of the verse is very definitely a description of salvation in relation to election: “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me.” Though this part of the verse is not quoted,

11. Michael Davies, “*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*: John Bunyan and spiritual autobiography” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan*, ed. Anne Dunan-Page (Cambridge, CUP, 2010), 67–79, 74.

Bunyan surely hints that the Father gave Christian to Good-will, the gatekeeper. Christian has come to Good-will, and Good-will by no means cast him out but did the opposite: pulled him in with a strong sense of urgency!

The Interpreter's House might initially seem a bit of a puzzle on either of the main accounts of Christian's conversion. On the view that Christian is not converted at the Wicket Gate but the empty tomb, it would be difficult to fit in how the images Christian sees and understands could square with him being an unbeliever. It is plain that the Interpreter is the Holy Spirit, who illumines the minds of Christians and helps them understand the Scriptures. On the view that Christian is converted at the Wicket Gate, it is a bit more understandable. As the commentator Scott says (a comment in the edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*), "With great propriety Bunyan places the house of the Interpreter *beyond* the strait gate; for the knowledge of Divine things, that precedes conversion to God by faith in Christ, is very scanty, compared with the diligent Christian's subsequent attainments" (98, emphasis original). However, there is still the puzzle of how Christian could enter into the path without the help of the Holy Spirit. The Interpreter makes perfect sense, however, if the Wicket Gate, the Interpreter's House, and the empty tomb are seen as a unified conversion event. On this reading, seen as a unified event, the Holy Spirit's work, the entrance on the path, and the tryst at the empty tomb are all one complex of events, and the temporal lag between these events fades into unimportance. Narrative sequence, after all, does not have to translate into temporal sequence in an actual Christian's life.

There are seven word-pictures of the Christian life, which the Interpreter shows Christian. Brilliantly imagined by Bunyan, they show nothing less than the entirety of the Christian life from beginning to end, not exhaustively, but certainly representatively. The first vision is of a minister earnestly calling people to Jesus Christ, representing the human instrument God uses for conversion. Almost certainly, Bunyan had his own pastor, Rev. Gifford, in mind. Next, a picture of the law/gospel distinction shows how the Christian comes to Christ from the Scriptures. The third vision, that of Passion and Patience, shows the end of the worldly person as opposed to the godly person. The fourth vision is of the person fed by the grace of God while being attacked by Satan, a picture of the battle the Christian faces all through life. The fifth vision is of the man who enters the kingdom by force. The sixth vision is of the man of despair.¹² The seventh and last image is that of the Second Coming of Christ.

Where we are at present is in a somewhat liminal place between the Wicket Gate and the empty tomb. On the one hand, the Interpreter interprets the Christian life to Christian, which seems unlikely on the supposition that Christian is not regenerated at that point. On the other hand, Christian still has his burden, though soon to be lost. The key, however, to understanding this in-between place is the constant refrain of the

12. This could be an echo also of the many bouts of depression and anxiety Bunyan himself experienced. As Cheever (in a comment in the edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*) mentions, "Bunyan intended not to represent this man as actually beyond the reach of mercy, but to show the dreadful consequences of departing from God, and of being abandoned of him to the misery of unbelief and despair" (101). There are passages in *Grace Abounding* that are very close to this vision. See especially paragraphs 183–7 and 253–8. It is hard to believe that Bunyan did not think of this man as embodying his own experience for at least several periods of his life.

seven scenes, wherein Christian starts by asking the meaning of the sign and ends with understanding and, hence, faith. The Holy Spirit as Interpreter is causing the scales to fall from Christian's eyes. Understanding the things of God brings transformation to Christian. Christian assesses the benefit of the Interpreter's House in two ways. He first says that the things he saw "put me in hope and fear" (102). Secondly, in the following poem, he calls attention to the stability he has acquired: "In what I have begun to take in hand" (102). The phrase is reminiscent of biblical phrases such as "putting one's hand to the plow" (Luke 9:62). Christian certainly believes that his Christian walk has already begun and that the biblical teaching solidifies his position on the Way.

The very next scene is of Christian losing his burden at the empty tomb. As has been said, this scene has been interpreted by some as assurance of salvation, not part of salvation itself. In favor of this interpretation is the nature of the burden as the feeling of guilt and the "glad and lightsome," "merry heart" he has afterward (102). However, the language of the change suggests that much more is happening in this scene than simply assurance. For one thing, the wall that leads up to the empty tomb is called "Salvation," not "Assurance." For another thing, what the first two of the three angels do for Christian is much more in line with justification than with assurance. The first angel issues a proclamation of forgiven sins, not merely an assurance that they were forgiven in the past. The passage quoted is Mark 2:5, certainly not a passage dealing primarily with assurance, but one in which Jesus pronounces forgiveness of sins on the man sick with the palsy, thus changing his status from unforgiven to forgiven. The second angel actually changes Christian's raiment, in reference to Zechariah 3, a passage commonly associated with justification.¹³ Even more conclusive is the third angel's gift of a roll with a seal on it, which by itself represents the assurance of the sealed Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13 is the Scripture reference). In other words, only the third angel's gift corresponds directly with assurance.¹⁴ At this point in the story, it is unclear what the mark on the forehead signifies, as it is not explained and does not form a part of Zechariah 3 or Ephesians 1:13. Possibly, it is the sign of baptism. The first two angels' actions, at any rate, have to do with justification.

The poem Christian sings would also seem to be about more than assurance. He speaks of "the beginning of my bliss," whereas before, he was still laden with his sin (103). The editor of Bunyan's works certainly believes that more than assurance is in view in this scene: "The Father receives the poor penitent with, 'Thy sins be forgiven thee.' The Son clothes him with a spotless righteousness" (103). There seem to be more indicators here of justification happening at the empty tomb than of mere

13. In Zechariah 3, the high priest Joshua was dressed in dirty clothes, and the angel took off the dirty clothes and put on clean clothes. In the Reformed understanding of justification, this represents the imputation of the believer's sin to Christ, and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. That Bunyan believed so is proven by his treatment of the passage in his work *Justification by an Imputed Righteousness: Or, No Way to Heaven but by Jesus Christ* (Works, I, 312–3).

14. After Christian loses the scroll and goes back to find it, Bunyan's comment is that "this roll was the assurance of his life and acceptance at the desired heaven" (106).

assurance, though, no doubt, the two are closely related. The evidence so far is in favor of my thesis that, broadly speaking, “conversion-type” language exists in Bunyan’s own words both for the Wicket Gate scene and for the empty tomb. More specifically, “entrance” or “regeneration” language prevails at the Wicket Gate, whereas “justification” language is present at the empty tomb. This will be consistent in the rest of *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Shortly after the empty tomb, Christian meets Formalist and Hypocrisy, two men born in the land of Vain-glory and seeking the way to Mount Sion. However, they did not come by way of the Wicket Gate. Hence, Christian upbraids them by saying that since they did not enter the proper way, they are but thieves and robbers (quoting John 10:1, 103). The Wicket Gate is plainly a *sine qua non* of salvation! This passage alone would disprove the idea that the empty tomb alone is all there is to conversion.

In the conversation that ensues, Christian joins together the Wicket Gate and the empty tomb in a revealing way: “By laws and ordinances you will not be saved, since you came not in by the door. And as for this coat that is on my back, it was given me by the Lord of the place whither I go; and that, as you say, to cover my nakedness with” (104). Even more tightly tied together are these two ideas after the end of the paragraph, where Christian posits that Formalist and Hypocrisy do not have the coat and the seal (what Christian got at the empty tomb!) *because they did not enter at the Wicket Gate!* Christian, then, at the very least, sees the Wicket Gate and the empty tomb as inseparable events. One could not receive the coat and seal without the Wicket Gate, which leads inevitably and fairly immediately to the empty tomb.

The same connectedness of narrative of these two events appears again at the House Beautiful, where Christian discourses with Piety. Within a few short paragraphs, the Wicket Gate and the empty tomb are both mentioned. Both events are described using a broadly “conversion-type” language. Piety asks Christian, “What moved you at first to betake yourself to a pilgrim’s life?” (107), a question Christian answers by way of Evangelist pointing out the Wicket Gate as the escape of destruction. This constitutes a being “driven out of my native country,” implying that being on the path headed by the Wicket Gate means being entirely outside the City of Destruction. Christian’s description of the empty tomb scene and the angels who ministered to him echoes what I have already said about justification: “One of them testified that my sins were forgiven me; another stripped me of my rags, and gave me this brodered coat which you see; and the third set the mark which you see in my forehead, and gave me this sealed roll” (108).

A relatively small, but not unimportant, piece of evidence arises out of Christian’s battle with Apollyon. Christian tells Apollyon that he must beware of attacking the Prince’s people, “for I am in the king’s highway, the way of holiness” (113). The way of holiness begins at the Wicket Gate, as is reiterated much later after Doubting Castle, in Christian’s discourse with Ignorance, when he says, “But thou camest not in at the wicket-gate that is at the head of this way” (146). This points strongly to regeneration being the entrance of the Wicket Gate since regeneration is the beginning of holiness.

The evidence of Part 1 points to the Wicket Gate and the empty tomb, with the Interpreter’s House intervening, as being a complex of events that are not separable. They are not divisible in the narrative structure, nor are they logically separable when

Christian speaks of them after the fact.

In Part 2, the evidence regarding the significance of the Wicket Gate and the empty tomb is more scarce. However, we shall see that the Wicket Gate is still mentioned in ways consistent with regeneration and the empty tomb of justification.

Christiana receives a Visitor, who serves the same purpose for her as Evangelist did for Christian. The Visitor tells her to “Go to the wicket-gate yonder, over the plain, for that stands in the head of the way up which thou must go” (174). The effectual call leads to regeneration. Later, when Mercy wonders whether she will be received, again the Wicket Gate is the answer (177). When Christiana’s children are allowed to enter, the biblical quotation from Matthew 19:14 (and parallel Luke 18:16) shows that the children also enter on the path of life through the Wicket Gate.

When Mercy converses with Good-will (though he is simply called the Keeper of the gate in Part 2), some evidence exists to support the idea that the Wicket Gate is the entirety of conversion, and the empty tomb is assurance. Mercy asks for forgiveness at the gate, and the Keeper grants pardon right then and there (180). However, a more careful reading suggests that the forgiveness is still in some way future. The Keeper says that the word includes the “promise of forgiveness” and by deed in “the way I obtained it” (180). This points forward to the tomb since when they all arrive at the tomb, the discussion is about justification as it relates to the two-fold nature of Christ as God-man. This explains the Keeper’s words at the gate, as is plain from Christiana’s remembrance of what was said (190). In the course of the conversation, the orthodox doctrine of the God-man’s righteousness obtained for sinners is what, for Christian, “cut those strings, that could not be cut by other means; and it was to give him a proof of the virtue of this that he was suffered to carry his burden to the cross” (Great-heart’s comment on 192). Great-heart further connects the Wicket Gate and the empty tomb in his comment about righteousness and imputation: “[T]he pardon that you and Mercy, and these boys have attained, was obtained by another, to wit, by him that let you in at the gate; and he hath obtained it in this double way. He has performed righteousness to cover you, and spilt blood to wash you in” (190). Great-heart also uses the imagery of coats (more than reminiscent of Christian’s experience at the tomb) to describe justification (191). There is no new evidence on this particular question in the rest of Part 2.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show that the Wicket Gate language tends to be the beginning of the holy life commensurate with regeneration. In contrast, the empty tomb language is more that of justification. By his nearly constant juxtaposition of the two ideas, Bunyan is suggesting that regeneration and justification belong together. This he pictured in allegorical form by having the Wicket Gate and the empty tomb so close to each other in narrative time. In turn, this sequence of events, with the Interpreter’s House in between, shows the work of the Holy Spirit both in regeneration and in justification. I have therefore come to the above conclusion and attempted to show that Bunyan saw the Wicket Gate, the Interpreter’s House, and the empty tomb as one interconnected whole, a complex of events that pictures the whole of conversion.

How would this conclusion affect Reformed piety? It is always a salutary challenge to the Christian when his view of salvation is broadened. We tend to want to over-simplify the Christian life: "The Christian life is about heart change," "The Christian life is about justification," "The Christian life is about assurance." The Christian life includes all these things and much more, but certainly it is not limited to any one of them. When we over-simplify the Christian life, we minimize the grounds of assurance. Then we fight much more doubt and agony of mind than is necessary. The issue is reminiscent of some of the best arguments against the so-called "contemporary grace movement" (which used to be called the Sonship movement). The problem is not that this modern view over-emphasizes grace. It is that the movement does not emphasize grace enough. Their view of grace is truncated, limiting itself merely to justification, but it leaves out God's grace in sanctification. When we connect justification and sanctification together, as Bunyan and the Reformers did, we avoid legalism and antinomianism, we have grace towards those not in the same place we are, and we can remain humble before God. We need a much more full-orbed view of God's grace if we are to make a pilgrim's progress throughout life.