

# The Sign of the Cross in John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*

Peter Goldman

Department of English  
University of California at Irvine  
Irvine, CA 92697  
pgoldman@uci.edu

My dear Children, call to mind the former days, the years of ancient times;  
remember also your songs in the night, and commune with your own heart.  
(The author's Preface to *Grace Abounding*, p. 3.)

The reader of John Bunyan's spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), may be surprised to learn that Bunyan does not seek salvation at all, at least not of his own desire and will. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, he is literally assaulted, over and over again, by signs, visions, and biblical texts which threaten and astound him. He writes that the word of God "would . . . fall like a hot thunderbolt . . . upon my Conscience . . . [causing] my very body as well as my minde to shake and totter under the sence of the dreadful Judgement of God. . . . I felt also such a clogging and heat at my stomach, by reason of this my terrour, that I was . . . as if my breast-bone would have split in sunder" (50). He is driven to God in fear and trembling. His fear of wrath and judgment compels him to seek the God of grace and mercy. A close reading of *Grace Abounding* reveals that mimetic rivalry and conflict, as defined by René Girard,<sup>(1)</sup> provide the fuel for the fire of fear and guilt which torments Bunyan. Mimetic rivalry is fundamentally interpersonal, but it is experienced subjectively and often internalized as guilt or inner conflict. As we know from Eric Gans, mimetic rivalry often finds expression in resentment, independently of any overt object of desire.<sup>(2)</sup> The angry God who persecutes Bunyan is essentially a reflection of Bunyan's own resentment. Mimetic rivalry and resentment are transformed into an inner struggle with God.

But how then does Bunyan find peace and assurance, the relief from fear and guilt? Dayton Haskin has observed that his experience conforms to the narrative paradigm found in Paul's conversion narrative, the transition from great "sin to abundant grace" (307). But conversion was not a matter of simply imitating the Biblical model. The Reformation doctrine of *sola fides* meant that salvation could never be reduced to any mechanical

repetition of the Biblical paradigm through either actions or words. Salvation required conversion, the sudden and unpredictable act of God, His unmerited bestowal of grace. Haskin, by explaining *Grace Abounding* in terms of a literary model, fails to account for Bunyan's experience of grace as a gift from God, as well as the ethical meaning of grace. The narrative paradigm noted by Haskin is ultimately rooted in human interaction and therefore falls under the domain of the ethical.

Thomas Luxon has recognized that the experience of conversion goes beyond simply a narrative paradigm. As Luxon observes, "The words of Scripture must be interpreted, but truly saving knowledge of God's Word involves more than interpretation; it must be experienced in the heart" (449). This experience comes through a sign, "a new conjunction of word and image . . . a new conjunction of the experience of things with the experience of the Word" (449). Calvin's doctrine of predestination meant that the central question of the Reformation, "what must I do to be saved?" would become the epistemological question, "how can I know if I have saving faith?" Faith is the result of God's "calling," the gift of grace at the moment of conversion. At the same time, the corruption of man's understanding after the fall of Adam made the direct perception of calling problematic. Individuals could search for only the *signs* of saving grace in everyday life. As we shall see, the paradigmatic sign of grace in Bunyan's experience is the Crucifixion. The Crucifixion (and its essential sequel, the Resurrection) forms the basis for both Bunyan's experience and the narrative pattern of his autobiography.

For Bunyan, grace is found at certain key moments when God communicates directly with him, giving him a sign. Grace is an *event*, located on a physical or virtual scene. Grace, for Bunyan, is always found and experienced through the mediation of an ostensive sign, either a biblical text or an image. He calls these moments of grace "songs in the night," suggesting their fundamentally private and emotionally affective nature (3). The essential feature of *Grace Abounding* is these moments of private revelation. At certain points in his quest, Bunyan is simply presented with a sign—a mysterious wind, a vision of Jesus, or a biblical text which suddenly "falls" upon him and seems to come from another realm. He must accept the sign as a personal message from God *in faith*; the only authority is the implied or explicit connection of the sign to the Bible, together with his experience of peace and assurance. The moment of grace actually obviates any rational process of interpretation. The sign is ostensive, directly pointing to God's mercy. The experience of grace is structured remarkably like an ecclesiastical sacrament as defined by Luther—consisting of the word, a sign, and the promise of grace—and communicates the same sense of peace and assurance (279). The crucial difference from a sacrament, however, is that grace for Bunyan is found privately, independently of the mediation of the church or priest. By finding grace on a private scene, Bunyan is liberated from the hierarchy and authority of the Established Church.

The resolution of Bunyan's inner struggle through a sign conforms to Eric Gans's definition

of the underlying function of culture as the “deferral of conflict through representation” and more specifically his “minimal hypothesis” of the human origin.<sup>(3)</sup> In Gans’s “generative anthropology,” a single “originary event” forms the generative matrix for the essential elements of human culture.<sup>(4)</sup> We can trace both the sacraments and Bunyan’s experience of grace back to this originary event as hypothesized by Gans. Bunyan writes, “the Lord would show me the death of Christ” (40); the representation of the Crucifixion (considered as a personal communication from God) functions to resolve, or more precisely to defer his inner conflict. His experience of grace as peace and assurance should always be understood as the successful deferral of mimetic conflict, even if that conflict has been effectively internalized. The Puritan imperative for conversion meant that the believer must seek the solution to conflict *within* first, and only then through the community of believers, the Separatist congregation.

## 2

### **From Mimetic Conflict to an Angry God**

Bunyan’s quest for salvation takes on a hermeneutic or epistemological dimension through (1) the Puritan imperative to understand the Bible and apply it to himself, to find his life in the Bible and find the Bible in his life, as well as (2) a search for the signs of grace. The basic interpretive mode in *Grace Abounding*, which is to say, the basic process of his progress toward salvation, is internalization and integration. We will examine how conflict is *internalized* by Bunyan as a prerequisite to its resolution on the scene of conversion. Integration and internalization may also be understood as forms of reconciliation. The basic problem of *Grace Abounding* is the reconciliation of self and Other.

Bunyan begins his narrative with a bold statement of class resentment. He recounts that he came from “a low and inconsiderable generation; my father’s house being of that rank that is meanest, and most despised of all families in the Land” (5). The language here goes beyond simply expressing his humble origins. He was actually “despised” for his “low generation.”<sup>(5)</sup> W.R. Owens notes that Bunyan’s works are filled with “antagonism towards the rich and powerful of this world” (xiii). In the allegorical world of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, as Bunyan comments pointedly, “Sins are all Lords and great ones” (PP 143). The fact that Bunyan wrote *Grace Abounding* from a jail cell may have contributed to the sense of resentment in his work. He was imprisoned in 1660 for preaching to an unlawful assembly and refusing to attend the services of the Established Church. He spent a total of twelve years in jail. The composition of his spiritual autobiography effectively helped to establish his identity as a non-conformist in the face of opposition.

Bunyan’s call to preaching formed one of the main points of his public controversies. The public authorities bitterly opposed Bunyan’s calling as a minister. “Mechanick preachers” were scorned by the established clergy and learned non-conformist ministers alike.<sup>(6)</sup> The

judges at his trial insisted that he leave off preaching and follow his “calling” as a tinker, his inherited trade (“A Relation” 110-11). The judges apparently did not want to imprison Bunyan because of the potential for negative publicity. If he would agree to leave off preaching, he would be released—an offer which Bunyan refused. The judges displayed bitter scorn and, at times, an almost irrational fury at Bunyan’s assertion of his (biblically-based) right to preach. In exasperation they threatened him with violence, telling him, “you must stretch by the neck for it, I tell you plainly” (118). This was not an idle threat; the law supported the death penalty for Bunyan’s charges (Watts 224). By maintaining his position in spite of the antagonism of the judges, Bunyan placed his beliefs above his life. On the side of the judges, it must be said that they were in fear of armed revolts, such as the recent London insurrection led by Fifth Monarchist Thomas Venner in which forty-six people were killed. But even so, there is considerable truth in the complaint of Bunyan’s wife to the judges, that “because he is a tinker and a poor man; therefore he is despised, and cannot have justice” (128).

At the age of sixteen years, Bunyan fought in the Civil War, serving in the Parliamentary army for three years—the “most impressionable age” in his mature development (Hill 7). When he recounts some of the early providences of his life, he mentions a fellow soldier who asked to take Bunyan’s place during a siege, and “as he stood Sentinel, he was shot into the head with a Musket bullet and died” (8). Although Bunyan’s narration of the Civil War is limited to this brief reference in *Grace Abounding*, we can safely speculate that the war’s impact upon him was enormous. The possibility of violence and death stands like a specter over his life’s work as a writer and preacher, imparting a desperate urgency to the imperative for salvation.

His fears, however, do not begin with the Civil War. Even as a child, and for at least the first half of his life, his inner struggle takes the form of an overwhelming fear of hell. He writes that “even in childhood He [the Lord] did scare and affright me with fearful dreams, and did terrifie me with dreadful visions. . . the apprehensions of Devils, and wicked spirits” (6). And even after he has been called to the ministry and begins preaching, one of the reasons he records in his decision not to avoid arrest is “the dread of the torments of Hell, which I was sure they must partake of, that for fear of the cross do shrink from their profession of Christ” (99). Sports and gaming are also connected with the fear of hell for Bunyan. As a youngster, “in the midst of my many sports and childish vanities, amidst my vain companions, I was often much cast down and afflicted in my mind” (6). In this same paragraph (§7), he makes a direct transition from his sports and games, to the “despair of life and heaven,” and then to a vision of torment and hell. And his famous vision of Christ as a threatening judge occurs during a game of tipcat,<sup>(7)</sup> another competitive game which could include betting (10). Sports and games are virtually the definition of competitive mimesis. Sports and games serve to channel mimetic rivalry into safe forms, but they can do so only by evoking the violence they are meant to defer. The possibility of conflict during these games is not imaginary. Bunyan was tremendously sensitive and imaginative, but the fear

that pervades his narrative is not irrational.

In addition to the climate of physical violence in England at this time, we should also take note of Bunyan's swearing, his violence of *language*. He writes that as a youth "I had but few Equals, . . . both for cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy Name of God" (6). Furthermore, "I did still let loose the reins to my lusts, and delighted in all transgression against the Law of God . . . I was the very ring-leader of all the Youth that kept me company, into all manner of vice and ungodliness" (7). His transgressions, and the fear of hell which results, occur in a group context involving competition and mimesis: he was the "ring-leader"; the others imitate him. The dangers of competitive imitation are especially prominent in the following passage:

But one day as I was standing at a Neighbor's Shop-window, and there cursing and swearing, and playing the Mad-man after my wonted manner, there sate within the woman of the house, and heard me; who, though she was a very loose and ungodly wretch, yet protested that I swore and cursed at that most fearful rate, that she was made to tremble to hear me; And told me further, *That I was the ungodliest Fellow for swearing that ever she heard in all her life; and that I, by thus doing, was able to spoile all the Youth in a whole town, if they came but in my company.*

27. At this reproof I was silenced, and put to secret shame; and that too, as I thought, before the God of heaven: wherefore, while I there stood, and hanging down my head, I wished with all my heart that I might be a little childe again, that my Father might learn me to speak without this wicked way of swearing. (11-12)

### 3

The thought that shames and frightens him here is not just his own swearing, but that by so doing he might "spoil all the youth in a whole town," *i.e.*, that they will imitate him.

Before he finds assurance of his salvation, Bunyan seeks to escape the entire possibility of mimetic conflict by recourse to some imaginary haven. He writes, "I wished with all my heart that I might be a little childe again" (12). Bunyan, like the romantics who came later, imagines childhood as a safe haven from a competitive and conflictual world. He expresses a similar escapist tendency when he writes that "now I was sorry that God had made me a man. . . . The beasts, birds, fishes, &c., I blessed their condition, for they had not a sinful nature, they were not obnoxious in the sight of God; they were not to go to Hell fire after death; I could therefore a rejoiced had my condition been as any of theirs" (28-29). His idealization of the animal world can be understood as the wish to escape the frustrations of

unfulfillable and conflictual mimetic desire.

His temptation to commit the sin against the Holy Ghost ("to sell my Saviour") may be understood in much the same light. This temptation comes after he has already found evidence of his calling. But every experience of grace, every sign of salvation, is only temporary. Inevitably he begins doubting again. He writes that the tempter provokes him "to desire to sin that sin, that I was as if I could not, must not, neither should be quiet until I had committed that" (33). The fact that this sin is represented as promising "quiet" suggests that conflictual desire again is at issue here. The sin against the Holy Ghost, according to the author of Hebrews, happens when "those who were once enlightened, and having tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost," reject that grace and "fall away" (6:4, 6). The crucial fact about this sin, the reason it represents a temptation to him, is that *it can never be forgiven*. Therefore it promises "quiet." It is the sin to end all sin. It promises the end of temptation, the endless deferral of desire, through the unrestrained pursuit of pleasure. More precisely, his wish here is to be rid of the *other* of mimetic desire, hence the temptation to "sell my Saviour" and thus to desire independently of any mediator. Vincent Newey is correct therefore when he writes, "Psychologically understood, the compulsion to 'sell and part with this most blessed Christ, to exchange him . . . for anything' represents the self's subconscious bid for autonomous being, for freedom from the authority of [the] Other" (198). At this stage in his quest, Bunyan still looks at Christ as the paternal interdictor of desire rather than his role-model for converted desire.

After the woman at the shop-window rebukes him for swearing, he resolves to leave off swearing and reform his life. He begins his pilgrimage proper with "outward reformation" (12), a well-established convention of the conversion narrative.<sup>(8)</sup> He begins to read the Bible, but only the historical parts, ignoring the epistles of Paul. In other words, he reads the Bible as an adventure tale, a form of entertainment, rather than a message of grace that applies to him here and now. He also begins attending church regularly. His outward reformation together with church attendance impresses his neighbors mightily:

Our Neighbors did take me to be a very godly man, a new and religious man, and did marvel much to see such a great and famous alteration in my life and manners. . . .

32. . . . When I understood that these were their words and opinions of me, it pleased me mighty well: for though, as yet, I was nothing but a poor painted hypocrite, yet I loved to be talked of as one that was truly godly. I was proud of my Godliness; and, I did all I did either to seen of, or to be well spoken of, by men. (12-13)

His reform is revealed here to be motivated by a desire for worldly admiration instead of a

desire for godliness in and of itself. In other words, he is still within a mimetic framework. His desire is focused on the things of this world rather than heaven. In Girardian terms, he still chooses an “internal mediator”: his desire is mediated by someone with whom he can compete (*i.e.* his church-going neighbors), instead of God, who is the perfect model for desire since He exists beyond all possibility of conflict (*DDN* 9). Puritanism demands of Bunyan more than simply moral reform. It asks for a complete change of heart, an internal conversion of his desire so that it is directed toward heavenly things. Bunyan’s outward reform brings him no peace of mind. His conscience continues to bother him despite the new-found praise and respect of his neighbors.

The next step of his pilgrimage is a sermon preached by his parson against breaking the Sabbath. This sermon awakens him to a new sense of guilt: “at that time I felt what guilt was, though never before, that I can remember, . . . and so went home . . . with a great burden upon my spirit” (10). But Bunyan’s guilt is not an unambiguous sign of grace. It is possible for a sinner to be awakened to a sense of guilt without “effectual calling.” His guilt makes him uncomfortable but does not effect true repentance: “when I had satisfied nature with my food, I shook the Sermon out of my mind, and to my old custom of sports and gaming I returned with great delight” (10).

#### 4

The parson and his sermon still exist in a relation of external authority to him and therefore do not impel him to repentance. He only forbids; he does not offer any positive ideal. The parson is above him in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but still relatively close to him, therefore he is a potential figure for rivalry. He can be excelled or rejected but cannot serve as an effective mediator for desire. For Bunyan, the way around the mimetic obstacle is to internalize the message, translating the sermon into a form which will more effectively impress his (still fallen) understanding. The same day, Sunday, the parson’s sermon against breaking the Sabbath finds expression in a voice and personal vision to the “eyes of my understanding”:

But the same day, as I was in the midst of a game at Cat, and having struck it one blow from the hole; just as I was about to strike it the second time, a voice did suddenly dart from Heaven into my Soul, which said, *Wilt thou leave thy sins, and go to Heaven? or have thy sins, and go to Hell?* At this I was put to an exceeding maze; wherefore, leaving my Cat upon the ground, I looked up to heaven, and was as if I had with the eyes of my understanding, seen the Lord Jesus looking down upon me, as being very hotly displeased with me, and as if he did severely threaten me with some grievous punishment for these, and other my ungodly practices. (10)

This is one of those key moments in which an instance of mimetic conflict is transformed, before our eyes, into an angry God who becomes the antagonist in an inner struggle. The minister, potentially a figure of rivalry and resentment, has given him a message of legal reform or Mosaic law—"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8)—an abstract ethical command external to his understanding. Not surprisingly, this message leaves no lasting impression until he translates it into a personal vision so that his guilt can be "fastened on my spirit" (10). To support my assertion that the minister of the Established Church is a mimetic rival, we can turn to an adjacent passage in which he describes his youthful infatuation with their religious services:

I was so overrun with the spirit of superstition, that I adored, and that with great devotion, even all things (both the High place, Priest, Clerk, Vestments, Service, and what else) belonging to the Church; counting all things holy that were therein contained; and especially the Priest and Clerk most happy, and without doubt greatly blessed, because they were the Servants, as I then thought, of God, and were principal in the holy Temple, to do his work therein.

17. This conceit grew so strong in little time upon my spirit, that had I but seen a Priest, (though never so sordid and debauched in his life) I should find my spirit fall under him, reverence him, and knit unto him; yea, I thought for the love I did bear unto them, (supposing they were the Ministers of God) I could have layn down at their feet, and have been trampled upon by them; their Name, their Garb, and Work, did so intoxicate and bewitch me. (9)

In this passage he describes his reverence for priests and clerks as only "superstition," a "conceit" of his fallen spirit. The priests are "sordid and debauched." As a youth he only "supposes" they were ministers of God, implying that in fact they are not. He speaks here with the voice of disillusioned innocence: the voice of resentment. This resentment finds expression in his vision of Jesus as an angry judge, who then mirrors his own resentment back upon him, directing it towards moral reform. It is not coincidental that this vision occurs during a game of tipcat, a competitive game which could include betting, rivalry, and conflict. His "sports and gaming" awaken passion and resentment, which is compounded with his resentment for the Established minister. Thus the anger of God is composed of his resentment towards (1) the Mosaic law itself, (2) the parson, and (3) his gaming companions. All of these sources work to frustrate his desire.

At this point in his autobiography, however, his understanding of Jesus is still incomplete. He still sees Jesus here as distinctly *other*, the vengeful threatening God of the Old Testament rather than his personal intercessor with God.<sup>(9)</sup> He misunderstands Jesus as *other*, rather than *human*, like himself, in this case, a reflection of his own resentment. His vision is effective in beginning the process of repentance, but at this point the moral



judgment offered by Jesus is still external to him, in the sense that he may accept or reject Jesus' warning. It is almost as if God is irrationally persecuting him. Before he can find forgiveness, he must come to a deeper insight into the nature of sin. The vehicle for this insight, as we shall see, is Jesus on the Cross, not the angry threatening God of wrath.

## **The Scene of Conversion**

In describing and summarizing the recursive process of his conversion, Bunyan writes,

In general [the Lord] was pleased to take this course with me, first to suffer me to be afflicted with temptation concerning them [the scriptures which torment him], and then reveal them to me [that is, their true meaning]; as sometimes I should lie under great guilt for sin, even crushed to the ground therewith, and then the Lord would show me the death of Christ, yea and so sprinkle my Conscience with his Blood, that I should find, and that before I was aware, that in that Conscience, where but just now did reign and rage the law, even there would rest and abide the Peace and Love of *God* thorow Christ.

128. Now had I an evidence, as I thought, of my salvation from Heaven, with many golden Seals, thereon, all hanging in my sight; now could I remember this manifestation, and the other discovery of grace with comfort; and should often long and desire that the last day were come, that I might for ever be inflamed with the sight, and joy, and communion of him, whose Head was crowned with Thorns, whose Face was spit on, and Body broken, and Soul made an offering for my sins. (39-40)

## **5**

Rather than giving us here a particular event, he describes a general process, a series of events: "I remember this manifestation, and the other discovery of grace with comfort"—referring to more than one of his "songs in the night." We will examine in detail some of these specific scenes. But I want to start with this passage because it reveals the fundamental process at work here. Grace generally comes to him through the word; all of his experiences in this regard are textually based, either explicitly or implicitly. But he reveals here that the essential content of the word, the one constant of the scene of conversion is in fact the crucified Jesus: "the Lord would show me the death of Christ" through either a text or a vision or both. In the above passage, he asserts that first he is "afflicted with temptation" by a particular scripture; then the Lord would "reveal them to me," that is, that same scripture's true meaning. This pattern of experience with scripture is synonymous with (as signified by the semi-colon and the conjunction "as" between the two clauses) his experience of "great guilt for sin," after which "the Lord would show me the

death of Christ" for assurance. The Scriptures, for Bunyan, all ultimately refer to the Cross. For Bunyan, the imperative in interpreting the Bible is to apply it to himself personally. When he does so, the scripture in question points to his guilt and need for forgiveness and/or God's mercy towards him, both of which are realized in the Crucifixion.<sup>(10)</sup>

In the above passage, the second paragraph (§128) further develops the assurance he feels from "the sight, and joy, and communion of him, whose Head was crowned with Thorns, whose Face was spit on" and so on. The assurance of his salvation is thus tied inextricably with an understanding of Jesus in his suffering and Crucifixion. Just as with Paul on the road to Damascus, conversion is simultaneous with a revelation of the victimization of Jesus ("I am Jesus whom thou persecutest," Acts 9:5).<sup>(11)</sup> The same experience is represented in *Pilgrim's Progress*: it is only when Christian encounters the "Cross, and a little below in the bottom, a sepulchre" that "his burden is loosed from off his shoulders, and fell off his back" (PP 81-2). As he describes his experience in retrospect at the House Beautiful, "I saw one, as I thought in my mind, hang bleeding upon a tree; and very sight of him made my burden fall off my back" (PP 93-4).

But, paradoxically, the Crucifixion also produces the fear and guilt which torment Bunyan. The crucified Jesus replicates in toto the pattern from fear and guilt to peace and assurance which constitutes his experience of conversion. We can safely assume therefore that this image holds the key to the process of conversion as portrayed in *Grace Abounding*. Let us begin by examining the first half of this pattern: the Crucifixion in relation to his sense of guilt.

His struggle with despair after he thinks he has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost serves to deepen his understanding of Christ's sacrifice and his guilt therein. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross renders all ritual sacrifices unnecessary because Jesus has offered himself for us "once for all" (10:10). In Bunyan's interpretation, just as Christ's sacrifice happens once and only once for all time, so our justification is also a one-time event. Having been once justified, therefore, those who continue in sin (*i.e.*, the sin against the Holy Ghost) have "crucified to themselves the Son of God afresh" (6:6); they sin directly against Jesus by making his sufferings non-redemptive—they make themselves guilty for the suffering and death of Jesus, for which they will be judged according to the law. Thus when Bunyan thinks that he has committed this sin, the idea which drives him to despair is that "My sin was point-blank against my Saviour" (52)—exactly Paul's realization on the road to Damascus. Bunyan concludes that "I had horribly abused the holy Son of God" (60). Although he later decides that he has not in fact committed this sin, his struggle here leads him into a deeper insight into the nature of sin itself. When he finally triumphs in his struggle with despair, it is through a metaphorical interpretation of an Old Testament Scripture: "the slayer that killeth any person unawares and unwittingly" may find shelter in the "city of refuge" from the "avenger of blood" (Josh. 20:3-4). He identifies himself as the "slayer" while the Scripture-promises are his "city of

refuge" (68-9). In his self-understanding as a "slayer," one who has sinned against the Son of God, Bunyan goes far beyond the simple recognition of original sin found in other conversion narratives.

Bunyan's genius is always to make the Bible intensely personal and relevant. It is not just the Romans and Jews who crucified Jesus, it is *I*, my own sin, which results in the sacrifice of the scapegoat. According to René Girard, what the Cross reveals, once and for all, is that the scapegoat is only a scapegoat, an innocent victim rather than a villain.<sup>(12)</sup> Christianity is the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism, the violence that hides behind the sacred. Once this revelation is made, humans can no longer so easily project their violence onto the *Other*; they are confronted with their own violence, and modern self-consciousness begins (Girard *THFW* 199). This is the "original sin" in which all humans without exception participate: our inherent propensity to conflictual desire and sacrificial violence. This sin is universal because, for Girard, it is the very basis of human culture. The Christian revelation demystifies the scapegoat mechanism and thus throws humans back upon themselves, upon their own inner resources, asking for the same radical renunciation of violence which Christ made. This renunciation is made possible through Christ's example.

But how does the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism in the Cross work to generate the experience of grace and assurance? Girard sees grace or atonement as an "at-one-ment, becoming reconciled with God" (*GR* 282). After the process of "kenosis," the "emptying" of conflictual desire, the self finds forgiveness through a complete mimetic identification with Christ and His love. Conversion is a "radical interiorization of the human drama of the Crucifixion," to borrow a phrase from Cesáreo Bandera (250). Generative anthropology allows us to further articulate the experience of grace by examining the role of *representation*, its power in deferring violence and generating transcendence.

In Bunyan's imaginative visualization of the crucified Jesus, the crucial factors are (1) this is a personal communication from God ("The Lord would show me the death of Christ"), and (2) this is an *internal* scene of representation.<sup>(13)</sup> The anti-ritualism found in the teachings of Jesus comes to full fruition during the Reformation. Jesus proclaimed that "the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). Jesus recognized that worship does not depend on a place such as the Jerusalem Temple, a sacred object, or any set rituals. The meaning and act of worship are essentially spiritual and transcendent. The scenic center of the originary event can be found within because the central locus of meaning is generated by the sign, a message from God. To have a soul means precisely to have an internal scene of representation. Thus in Christianity the generation of sacred or religious significance is no longer dependent on a physically central scene, as in ritual. Worship can be found "Where two or three are gathered together in my name" (Matt. 18:20), or even with the solitary believer who retires to his closet, shuts the door to pray, "and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward you openly" (Matt. 6:6).

The liberation of worship from the external ritual center is realized through the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. Gans argues persuasively that Paul, rather than the original apostles, was the first to grasp the true significance of the Resurrection:

Paul's revelation [on the road to Damascus] teaches him the real meaning of the resurrection that the original apostles like Peter had never understood: that it is not a bodily but a spiritual experience, that it consists in the hearing of a voice rather than in the touching of wounds, and above all, that it is the direct consequence of the persecution of Jesus, in which all men without exception were implicated. By assuming the status of the central victim, Jesus forces those who persecute him to centralize him in their imagination, to reproduce the operation of divinization as it occurred in the originary event.

Paul's vision shows him that to combat Jesus' doctrine is to persecute a person, and thereby to resurrect his voice. But this voice can henceforth be recognized as speaking in Paul himself, something that Moses could never have said of his God. Once this last external revelation has taken place, all future revelation will come from within; revelatory experience proper will no longer be necessary. (SF 106)

The important fact about Bunyan's vision of the crucified Jesus, the reason why it becomes a source of grace rather than guilt, is that Jesus *persists* there: He lives on-spiritually. Grace in this sense is not contained in the image of Jesus but rather in Bunyan's complete involvement with that image—"with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (Mark 12:30)—his whole self. This involvement is generated by his antagonistic struggle with God. Only through fear and guilt can grace be found, and only the Cross provokes both halves of this pattern. The purpose of the sign of the Cross, the memory of the Crucifixion, is to generate an experience of fear and guilt followed by love and transcendence which will then be effectively retained in the memory as an event. The transcendence of the sign is first of all its power to defer conflict and, second, the persistence of the sign over time and its independence of physical place. The Cross is the paradigmatic sign of grace because of its ethical implications and its affective power which makes it persist within the soul.

Subjectively at least, Christ lives on through Bunyan's love for him. Bunyan finds assurance because the internal scene of representation, his own memory, can continue to generate the sacred difference which defines his new sense of self. The continued presence of Jesus despite his suffering and death assures Him, and Bunyan himself, of eternal life. The Crucifixion and the Resurrection are two sides of the same coin in Gans's analysis. Victimization becomes divinization through the transcendence of representation, the sign of

the Cross.

Paradoxically, this transcendence, or spiritual worship is made possible only by the actual historical sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The physical reality of Christ's sacrifice is the basis for Bunyan's sense that grace originates from outside himself; grace is a gift from God, not primarily a subjective experience.

The connection between Bunyan and Jesus, the link which enables his salvation, is the humanity of Jesus. Bunyan's full assurance comes when he is able to see Christ as a *whole* person, which is to say, including the full range of human potential: "I was not onely looking upon this and the other benefit of Christ apart, as of his Blood, Burial, or Resurrection, but considered him as a whole Christ!" (73). This insight into Christ's full humanity allows Bunyan to find the promise of eternal life by identifying himself with Christ, merging with his humanity and thus partaking in his divinity: "the Lord did also lead me into the mystery of Union with this Son of God, that I was joynd to him, that I was flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone" (73). The internalization of the voice of God (that is, the internal realization of grace through a sign) can happen only because Jesus is human.

Christ's death on the Cross is a re-enactment of the originary event as defined by generative anthropology: a central figure sacrificed for the community as a whole (*OT* 7-9). But Bunyan finds liberation from the necessity of a public sacrifice or ritual by reproducing it spiritually, within himself. He is liberated from hatred and fear of the *Other* because he has realized the *Other* within. The *Other* in this context is primarily the Old Testament God of wrath who reflects human resentment and offers judgment according to the law. The Cross reveals the result of human conflict and thus points Bunyan back towards himself, his personal guilt and future responsibility, while at the same time offering transcendence through its function as a sign.

The scene of conversion, however, is not always articulated explicitly in terms of the Crucifixion. Bunyan is almost destroyed by despair before he comes to a turning point, the first sign of grace to his soul which he is able to recognize as such and realize in his experience. Grace comes to him through the word, a sermon on Song of Songs 4:1: "Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair." The unnamed minister focuses especially on the words "my love," interpreting them as an expression of Christ's love towards the elect (29). As Bunyan walks home and meditates on the text, he experiences what Samuel Petto calls "the Voice of the Spirit" (3):

The words ["my love"] began thus to kindle in my spirit. . . .they waxed stronger and warmer, and began to make me look up; but being as yet between hope and fear, I still replied in my heart,

*But is it true too? but is it true?*

at which, that sentence fell in upon me,

*He wist not that it was true which was done unto him of the angel,*

Acts 12. 9. (29)

7

In response to this sign of grace, he writes, "I thought I could have spoken of his love, and of his mercy to me, even to the very crows that sat upon the ploughed lands before me. . . . I was helped to believe that it was a true manifestation of grace unto my soul" (30). The Scripture which "fell in upon" him points to the intervention of an angel and shows how Bunyan typically thinks of grace as a personal encounter with a living spiritual being, which is to say that he realizes the ethical meaning of grace. His first vision of Jesus was as a threatening judge, so it is entirely appropriate that evidence of grace comes with an insight into Christ's love. Rather than a vision, he finds grace here through the spoken word ("my love") and the invisible work of the Spirit. Even when the Spirit speaks directly to his soul, his experience is always mediated by a sign, either a text or an image. In the originary scene as hypothesized by Eric Gans, the first humans are required to submit their desires to the sign, extending their desiring imagination into communion with the sacred through the sign (OT 9). In this first overt token of grace to his soul, Bunyan is presented with a sign, the phrase "my love." This phrase can be considered as a sign insofar as it constitutes a message from God which testifies to his salvation. He must accept this sign in faith, believing that it is in fact meaningful and then applying it to himself, thus finding assurance. He meditates on the word alone; no external authority beyond the Bible validates the word or his experience. The scenic center of the origin thus becomes internalized, set free from ritual and hierarchy. The ideal of Christianity, as Gans notes, "is for each individual to become his own center, recognizing at the same time the centrality of the other" (SF 97). The Puritan rejection of ecclesiastical mediation and hierarchy was an attempt to bypass the resentment generated by the figure of the priest or monk as rival and return to the egalitarian reciprocity of the originary event. But even without the intervention of priests, rituals, and hierarchy, the minimal mediation of language itself remains inescapable. Although this is a private revelation, Bunyan then imagines himself communicating the word by preaching to the crows of the field. Since the meaning of the sign, grace itself, is fundamentally ethical, the sign must be communicated in order to find its full potential.

Of course, there is no immediate possibility of conflict here as there was in the originary scene or during the game of tipcat. Even so, the problem of mimetic conflict, with its resultant fear and guilt, motivates his search for grace and assurance. Moreover, this sign comes directly after Bunyan attends a sermon with the accompanying crowd of people. Any sizable assembly of people, even a peaceful assembly, is inherently a situation of intense

mimesis. The massed attention of the group focused on the central figure of the preacher may well have mimetically inspired the desire for his own centrality, which comes through the internalization of the preacher's biblical message. The content of the text here is not merely fortuitous. "My love" represents the supreme fulfillment of the aim of culture: the transcendence of fear and conflictual desire through mutual love. By voluntarily accepting his Crucifixion, Jesus offers up to his persecutors an inverse reflection of their murderous resentment and converts it, through his Resurrection, into love and forgiveness. The love experienced (and expressed) by Bunyan is fundamental to the meaning of his conversion, certainly, but what is truly revolutionary is that this love is found within first, through a sign, and then communicated to his audience. Grace comes through the mediation of a sign and independently of the church, although still linked to the preaching of the word.

Another example from *Grace Abounding* will make my point clearer. The following scene occurs later in the book, when Bunyan is wondering if he has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost and, as a result, is struggling with despair. One day as he finds himself in "a good mans Shop, bemoaning" his condition,

Suddenly there was as if there had rushed in at the Window, the noise of Wind upon me, but very pleasant, and as if I had heard a Voice speaking, *Didst ever refuse to be justified by the Blood of Christ?* and withal my whole life of profession past, was in a moment opened to me, wherein I was made to see, that designedly I had not; so my heart answered groaningly *No*. Then fell with power that Word of God upon me, *See that ye refuse not him that speaketh*, Heb. 12.25. This made a strange seizure upon my spirit; it brought light with it, and commanded a silence in my heart. (52-53)

This is the only place in *Grace Abounding* in which Bunyan directly discerns a sign in the natural world—"the noise of Wind"—nevertheless the wind here is closely associated with "a Voice speaking." We should note that this sign, like all his personal revelations, is "as if," indicating that no miraculous suspension of natural law occurs. The symbolism here suggests the action of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:2), so we may safely infer that the wind is being represented as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit to his soul, rather than a physical wind. Presumably someone watching him at this moment would not discern either the "noise of Wind" or the voice he hears. He calls this episode a "strange dispensation," one of the "secret things" of his history: "what it was, I knew not; from whence it came, I knew not. . . . that sudden rushing Wind, was as if an Angel had come upon me" (53). In any case, whether an actual "noise of Wind" occurs or not, what is important for our analysis is that Bunyan experiences it as such.

This episode illustrates the Puritan deconstruction of all the external, merely formal, elements of representation, thus effectively revealing the basic structure of the originary

event. In the originary scene, the aborted gesture of appropriation is not really a sign until it has been interpreted as such, until the first human, in a moment of insight, is able to *see* the aborted gesture as *meaning* the sacred object, and through this miraculous insight *becoming* human. The first human is presented with a gesture which in and of itself has no meaning, which cannot even really be called a sign as such, until he or she *discovers* the potential for meaning, actualizing it within himself, and then communicating it to the other humans on the periphery.<sup>(14)</sup>

## 8

As Gans notes, the original conversion is from hominid to human through the act of representation (*OT* 183). Bunyan, likewise, is presented with a sign (“the noise of Wind”) which he must interpret as a sign of grace. The connection to the action of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost provides the necessary biblical validation for the sign. But even so, he must respond to this sign in faith, interpreting it as a sign of God’s grace towards him personally, independently of any external authority, for the wind is an everyday occurrence, not in and of itself sacred. The promise of grace is fulfilled directly in the experience of assurance. The pragmatic effect is that “it commanded a great calm in soul” and “made a strange seizure upon my spirit; it brought light with it, and commanded a silence in my heart” (53). The real proof of the truth of his revelation is that it works to produce peace in his heart.

The words spoken to Bunyan during this episode (“See that ye refuse not him that speaketh”) point to the danger inherent in private revelation. Once the imagination is set free from the external world it acquires the potential for unregulated solipsism. Bunyan has been morbidly brooding on his sin and as a result suffers from despair. He has become isolated from the community in solipsistic interiority. The ultimate purpose of private revelation is not independence for its own sake but the ethical life of the community. The Spirit commands him to “refuse not him who speaketh”-to leave off his morbid imagining and submit himself to the word in recognition of the Other.

The importance of community is brought out in his encounter with “three or four poor women” from the newly-formed Bedford Independent congregation-one of the most important turning points in his narrative. This encounter occurs near the beginning of *Grace Abounding*, but it foreshadows the final ethical aim of the process of conversion. The following scene is not exactly a scene of conversion because it does not include the experience of peace and assurance, but it nonetheless presents Bunyan with a sign of grace, although one recognized as such only retrospectively:

I came to where there was three or four poor women sitting at a door in the Sun, and talking about the things of God; and being now willing to hear them discourse, I drew near to hear what they said; for I was now a brisk talker also my self in the matters of Religion: but now I may say, *I heard, but I understood*



*not*; for they were far above my reach, for their talk was about a new birth. (14)

This encounter awakens him to his need for grace and the inefficacy of moral reform. He learns here that grace does not result from moral action and requires instead a complete inward transformation (“a new birth”). Talking (“I was now a brisk talker”) or any worldly action will not lead him to grace. Scenically, Bunyan finds himself excluded from a community which is symbolically represented as living under the protection of grace. They sit “at a door,” representing Jesus as the Way, and “in the sun,” enjoying the favor of his warming grace. He writes that “they were to me as if they had found a new world, as if they were people that dwelt alone, and were not to be reckoned amongst their Neighbors, Num. 23. 9” (15). The separation of this “new world” suggests its freedom from resentment and conflict while also providing a justification for Separating Congregationalism. A Separatist congregation was ideally a refuge from the more unpredictable and competitive larger society. His providential encounter with the women is potentially an important sign of his election, and he responds in faith by “going again and again into the company of these poor people; for I could not stay away” (15). When Bunyan is able to narrate the story of his conversion, he will find admission to this community; he will become integrated into and reconciled with this group.

## **Conclusion**

Bunyan’s debt to the Bible can be summed up in terms of the Passion story, Christ’s suffering, death, and Resurrection. In essence, Bunyan has internalized the drama of Christ’s Passion. How is this pattern of experience different from conformity to the Pauline narrative paradigm? Narrative is a retrospective act, looking backward after the event. Grace, on the other hand, is sought in the moment. The Reformation doctrine of *sola fides* ultimately meant the imperative of a personal (inward) experience of grace, not merely an external repetition of the Biblical paradigm through either actions or words (narrative). One needed actually to experience conversion by first confronting one’s own sin and guilt and then, through this very struggle, finding grace through a sign. The sign is paradigmatically the Crucifixion but may also be articulated through any Biblical text. Bunyan’s experience follows the pattern established in the New Testament of Christ’s suffering and death on the Cross followed by his triumphant Resurrection from the grave. For Bunyan, this structure is manifested in the agonizing confrontation with his own sin and the fear of hell, followed by one of his “songs in the night,” the private experience of grace. The first half of this pattern, the experience of fear and guilt, can only be adequately explained as the result of mimetic rivalry as defined by René Girard. In a similar fashion, the second half of the pattern, the experience of grace, conforms to Eric Gans’ definition of culture as the “deferral of conflict through representation” in accordance with the minimal hypothesis of human origin. Grace comes through the mediation of a sign.

Bunyan's experience, however, needs to be further articulated in terms of his historical context. The novelty of Bunyan's experience lies in his radical interiorization of the Biblical drama. In the Catholic and Anglican Churches, the memory of the Crucifixion is communicated primarily through the Sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is controlled by the Church and its ecclesiastical hierarchy. With Bunyan, however, the Church has become secondary to his private experience. By finding grace on a private scene, he is liberated from the hierarchy and authority of the Established Church in England, along with the potential for resentment which is inherent in any hierarchy. His relationship with God, in this sense, is less mediated; he relies only on a sign from God, a personal communication from God to him.

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Bunyan's insistence on a personal relationship with God, combined with his lack of worldly status and formal education, was for the Established clergy of his day at best a misguided spiritual pride and at worst a heretical blasphemy. Bunyan realized the most radical implications of Luther's doctrine of salvation by faith alone and especially Luther's understanding that grace is found through passionate adherence to the suffering of the Cross. *Grace Abounding* represents an important step in the centrifugal liberation of the sacred from priestly authority and its integration into everyday life—a decentralizing and democratizing movement which defines the history of Christianity and makes modernity possible. Bunyan's practical realization of the egalitarian potential of the originary event—through its reenactment in the scene of conversion—gave him a spiritual freedom that the authorities found scandalous and subversive. Yet Bunyan was always careful to distinguish himself from the more radical antinomian sects such as the Ranters, with whom the authorities confused him. Bunyan refuses to assert that his experiences are in any way miraculous or that they supersede the revelation already given in the Bible. He still respects the necessity for a biblically-validated sign. But he has internalized sacred difference; that is, the absolute difference of God becomes internal to himself via the internal scene, and this difference defines his identity.

The Puritans' emphasis on individual interpretation can be understood as a result of their rejection of the mediating function of the Established Church. Without the ritual ecclesiastical structure to guide experience, individuals needed to (1) apply the Bible to themselves and (2) find the signs of grace in their personal life. But conversion demanded going beyond simply reading and interpreting the Bible; conversion meant experiencing both guilt and redemption through the sign of the Cross.

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### Notes

1. For an overview of Girard's theory of mimetic or conflictual desire, see *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), pp. 9-44.[\(back\)](#)

2. For Gans, resentment expresses mimetic rivalry, but it also takes on a more specific meaning. Resentment is the scandal of a person (or persons) who enjoys social significance and power based on an apparently arbitrary social hierarchy. The overt presence of an object of desire is not required. Resentment is purely a function of relative social position, although it is still appropriate to call the person who inspires resentment a mimetic rival. For a discussion of resentment in relation to the birth of hierarchical society, see Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985), pp. 150-175. For a discussion of resentment on the "originary scene," see Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993), p. 18.[\(back\)](#)

3. On the minimal hypothesis, see Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking*, pp. 1-20, and *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), pp. 13-36.[\(back\)](#)

4. On generative anthropology, see Eric Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology*, *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*, and

*Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures.*[\(back\)](#)

5. For a recent discussion of the historical context and accuracy of Bunyan's characterization of his family circumstances, see Michael Mullett, *John Bunyan in Context*, (Keele, Staffordshire: Keele UP, 1996) pp. 10-12.[\(back\)](#)

6. On the seventeenth-century controversy over "mechanick preachers," see Mullett, pp. 49-50.[\(back\)](#)

7. Cat or tipcat is a difficult-sounding game using a small piece of wood and a stick.[\(back\)](#)

8. For an account of the "Themes and Variations" of the conversion narrative, see Owen Watkins, *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), pp. 37-52.[\(back\)](#)

9. There has been some speculation that the angry God who terrorizes Bunyan reflects Bunyan's resentment towards his father. See Mullett's discussion of this issue, pp. 15-16. Our anthropological perspective does not by any means rule out such speculation, and we might predict that mimetic rivalry between parents and children is to a certain extent inevitable, as Freud suggests. Girard interprets the Oedipus complex as an expression of mimetic rivalry. See *Violence and the Sacred*, pp. 169-192. The only problem with this interpretation of Bunyan's fear of God is that he expresses little or no resentment towards his father in *Grace Abounding*.[\(back\)](#)

10. See, for example, Bunyan's obsession with Hebrews 12:16: "Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright" (43). Bunyan is convinced that this scripture applies to him personally insofar as he has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. When he later decides that he is not guilty of this sin, the same scripture works to give him assurance (71).[\(back\)](#)

11. On the connection between persecution and resurrection, see Gans, *Science and Faith*, pp. 85-116.[\(back\)](#)

12. On the scapegoat mechanism and the Christian revelation, see *The Girard Reader*, pp. 69-93, 158-193.[\(back\)](#)

13. In generative anthropology, the "scene of representation" is fundamentally the scene of human interaction insofar as human interaction is mediated by signs.[\(back\)](#)

The scene of representation may be external (the physical exchange of signs between humans) or internal (within the memory or imagination). The imagination is the internal scene of representation. The use of a sign, even in the imagination, implies the virtual presence of an other or others.

14. Cf. Gans on originary rhetoric, *Signs of Paradox*, p. 34.[\(back\)](#)