

Spurgeon's Conversion in His Own Words

As I explained in the body of the book, Keller uses Spurgeon's conversion in setting out his own view of regeneration; more precisely, I have contended that Keller *misuses* Spurgeon's experience. To substantiate this claim, in addition to what I have already said, I can do no better than let Spurgeon speak for himself. The contrast between Keller's account of Spurgeon's conversion and Spurgeon's is glaring.

Spurgeon:

I remember, when [as a child] I used to awake in the morning, first thing I took up was Alleine's *Alarm*, or Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*.¹ Oh, those books, those books! I read and devoured them when under a sense of guilt, but it was like sitting at the foot of Sinai.² For five years, as a child, there was nothing before my eyes but my guilt...

It was my sad lot, at that time, to feel the greatness of my sin, without a discovery of the greatness of God's mercy. I had to walk through this world with more than a world upon my shoulders, and sustain a grief that as far exceeds all other griefs as a mountain exceeds a molehill; and I often wonder, to this day, how it was that my hand was kept from rending my own body in pieces through the awful agony which I felt when I discovered the greatness of my transgression. Yet, I had not been, openly and publicly, a greater sinner than others, but heart sins were laid bare, sins of lip and tongue were discovered, and then I knew – oh, that I may never have to learn over again in such a dreadful school this terrible lesson! – 'the iniquity of Judah and of Israel is exceeding great'... That trumpet of conviction

¹ Joseph Alleine: *An Alarm to Unconverted Sinners*; Richard Baxter: *A Call to the Unconverted*.

² The Puritans mistakenly held to the necessity of 'a law work' before faith. Among my works, see my *Christ; Four*.

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which aroused my soul to think of eternal things sounded a resurrection note to all my sins, and, oh, how they rose up in multitudes more countless than the sands of the sea! Now, I saw that my very thoughts were enough to damn me, that my words would sink me lower than the lowest hell; and as for my acts of sin, they now began to be a stench in my nostrils, so that I could not bear them... I reckoned that the most defiled creature, the most loathsome and contemptible, was a better thing than myself, for I had so grossly and grievously sinned against Almighty God...

When I was in the hand of the Holy Spirit, under conviction of sin, I had a clear and sharp sense of the justice of God. Sin, whatever it might be to other people, became to me an intolerable burden. It was not so much that I feared hell, as that I feared sin; and all the while, I had upon my mind a deep concern for the honour of God's name, and the integrity of his moral government. I felt that it would not satisfy my conscience if I could be forgiven unjustly. But then there came the question: 'How could God be just, and yet justify me who had been so guilty?' I was worried and wearied with this question; neither could I see any answer to it. Certainly, I could never have invented an answer which would have satisfied my conscience. The doctrine of the atonement is to my mind one of the surest proofs of the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture. Who would or could have thought of the just ruler dying for the unjust rebel? This is no teaching of human mythology, or dream of poetical imagination. This method of expiation is only known among men because it is a fact: fiction could not have devised it. God himself ordained it; it is not a matter which could have been imagined. I had heard of the plan of salvation by the sacrifice of Jesus from my youth up, but I did not know any more about it in my innermost soul than if I had been born and bred in darkest Africa and had never been granted the light of the gospel.³ The light was there, but I was blind: it was of necessity that the Lord himself should make the matter plain to me. It came to me as a new revelation, as fresh as if I had never read in Scripture that Jesus was declared to be the propitiation for sins that God might be just. I believe it will have to come as a revelation to every newborn child of God whenever he sees it; I mean

³ Original 'a Hottentot'. This term is offensive today.

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that glorious doctrine of the substitution of the Lord Jesus. I came to understand that salvation was possible through vicarious sacrifice, and that provision had been made in the first constitution and arrangement of things for such a substitution. I was made to see that he who is the Son of God, co-equal, and co-eternal with the Father, had of old been made the covenant head of a chosen people, that he might in that capacity suffer for them and save them. Inasmuch as our fall was not at the first a personal one, for we fell in our federal representative, the first Adam, it became possible for us to be recovered by a second representative, even by him who has undertaken to be the covenant head of his people, so as to be their last Adam.⁴ I saw that, ere I actually sinned, I had fallen by my first father's sin; and I rejoiced that, therefore, it became possible in point of law for me to rise by a second head and representative. The fall by Adam left a loophole of escape; another Adam could undo the ruin wrought by the first. When I was anxious about the possibility of a just God pardoning me, I understood and saw by faith that he who is the Son of God became man, and in his own blessed person bore my sin in his own body on the tree. I saw that the chastisement of my peace was laid on him, and that with his stripes I was healed. It was because the Son of God, supremely glorious in his matchless person, undertook to vindicate the law by bearing the sentence due to me, that therefore God was able to pass by my sin. My sole hope for heaven lies in the full atonement made upon Calvary's cross for the ungodly. On that I firmly rely. I have not the shadow of a hope anywhere else. Personally, I could never have overcome my own sinfulness. I tried and failed. My evil propensities were too many for me, till, in the belief that Christ died for me, I cast my guilty soul on him, and then I received a conquering principle by which I overcame my sinful self..

In my conversion, the very point lay in making the discovery that I had nothing to do but to look to Christ, and I should be saved.

I break in to admit that Keller uses similar language. But the devil lies in the detail: while Keller and Spurgeon both use

⁴ Original 'second Adam'.

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'save', and looking to Christ alone, whereas the former uses it to speak of being 'delivered from trying to get self-esteem in the wrong way', the latter uses it to mean being 'delivered from the wrath of God by being made⁵ perfect in God's sight'. Chalk and cheese!

Spurgeon went on:

I believe that I had been a very good, attentive hearer; my own impression about myself was that nobody ever listened much better than I did. For years, as a child, I tried to learn the way of salvation, and either I did not hear it set forth, which I think cannot quite have been the case, or else I was spiritually blind and deaf, and could not see it and could not hear it; but the good news that I was, as a sinner, to look away from myself to Christ, as much startled me, and came as fresh to me, as any news I ever heard in my life. Had I never read my Bible? Yes, and read it earnestly. Had I never been taught by Christian people? Yes, I had, by mother, and father, and others. Had I not heard the gospel? Yes, I think I had; and yet, somehow, it was like a new revelation to me that I was to 'believe and live'. I confess to have been tutored in piety, put into my cradle by prayerful hands, and lulled to sleep by songs concerning Jesus; but after having heard the gospel continually, with line upon line, precept upon precept, here much and there much, yet, when the word of the Lord came to me with power, it was as new as if I had lived among the unvisited tribes of Central Africa, and had never heard the tidings of the cleansing fountain filled with blood, drawn from the Saviour's veins. When, for the first time, I received the gospel to my soul's salvation, I thought that I had never really heard it before, and I began to think that the preachers to whom I had listened had not truly preached it. But, on looking back, I am inclined to believe that I had heard the gospel fully preached many hundreds of times before, and that this was the difference – that I then heard it as though I heard it not; and when I did hear it, the message may not have been any more clear in itself than it had been at former times, but the power of the Holy Spirit was present to open my ear, and to guide the message to my

⁵ See my *Four*.

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heart. I have no doubt that I heard, scores of times, such texts as these: 'He that believes and is baptised shall be saved'; 'Look unto me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth'; 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life'; yet I had no intelligent idea of what faith meant. When I first discovered what faith really was, and exercised it – for with me these two things came together, I believed as soon as ever I knew what believing meant – then I thought I had never before heard that truth preached. But, now, I am persuaded that the light often shone on my eyes, but I was blind, and therefore I thought that the light had never come there. The light was shining all the while, but there was no power to receive it; the eyeball of the soul was not sensitive to the divine beams. I could not believe that it was possible that my sins could be forgiven...

I know, when I first read *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and saw in it the woodcut of Christian carrying the burden on his back, I felt so interested in the poor fellow, that I thought I should jump with joy when, after he had carried his heavy load so long, he at last got rid of it; and that was how I felt when the burden of guilt, which I had borne so long, was forever rolled away from my shoulders and my heart.⁶

And in a sermon he preached in 1890, near the end of his life, Spurgeon testified:

Well do I remember when I first gripped the thought that Jesus suffered in my place and that I, looking to him, was saved. I felt a peace like a river, ever flowing, ever deepening, ever widening. My former trouble had arisen from the question – how could God, as a righteous judge, pass by my violation of his holy law? Sin is not to be viewed as a personal offence to God, as a being, but a rebellion against his laws as the judge of all the earth, who must do right.

How could he wink at sin? How could he treat the guilty as the innocent? When I saw that he did not wink at sin, but that Jesus came to vindicate the divine law by suffering in our place, I rested with all confidence on that blessed fact!

⁶ *Autobiography Diary, Letters, and Records*, by His Wife and His Private Secretary, Vol.1.

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My heart said: 'It is enough', and today it still cries: 'It is enough'.⁷

And so that we should not be left in any doubt, let us hear Spurgeon on what he understood by 'being a new creature in Christ' (2 Cor. 5:17):

What is meant by the Christian being a new creature? Three thoughts seem to me to spring up from the words, and the first is the believer must then have been the subject of a radical change. He is said to be a new creature, which is of all things a most sweeping change. There are many changes which a man may undergo, but they may be far from being radical enough to be worth calling a new creation... A man may be changed from one sin to another, from reckless profanity to mocking formality, from daring sin to hypocritical pretension to virtue; but such a change... is very far from being saving, and not at all like the work which is called a new creation... [the sinner] being still unchanged in [his] nature, still voracious and cruel, fickle and unstable.

Similarly, a man may pursue self-esteem in a different way, even by Christ, but this does not mean he is regenerate.

Spurgeon continued:

No doubt there are great moral changes wrought in many which are not saving. I have seen a drunkard become sober; I have known persons of debauched habits become regular; and yet their changes have not amounted to regeneration or the new birth. The same sin has been within them, reigning still, though it has assumed a different garb, and used another voice. Ah, you may be washed from outward leprosy, and you may be made straight from your visible infirmities, but this will not suffice you; if you are in Christ you must have more than this; for 'if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new'.

Pursuing one's 'identity' (self-worth, according to Keller) by Christ instead of a romantic affair, career, academic status or

⁷ Spurgeon sermon number 2145.

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whatever, leaves the pursuit of self-worth untouched, and the sinner unregenerate.

Spurgeon continued:

Nor will the most startling changes suffice unless they are total and deep... Do you see, then, how very searching the word is here, 'a new creature', absolutely a new creation. It is a root and branch change; not an alteration of the walls only, but of the foundation; not a new figuring of the visible tapestry, but a renewal of the fabric itself. Regeneration is a change of the entire nature from top to bottom in all senses and respects.⁸ Such is the new birth, such is it to be in Christ and to be renewed by the Holy Ghost...

How is this done? We reply that the man who is in the first Adam, being translated into the second Adam, becomes legally a new creature. As in the first Adam, he is judged and condemned, his punishment is laid upon his substitute; but as viewed in the second representative Man, he is legally, and before the bar of God's justice, a new creature.⁹

And so on.

In another sermon on the text, Spurgeon declared:

This is a very sweeping statement. A man in Christ is not the old man purified, nor the old man improved, nor the old man in a better humour, nor the old man with additions and subtractions! Nor is he the old man dressed in gorgeous robes! No, he is a new creature altogether! As for the old man, what is to be done with him? Can he not be sobered, reformed and made to do us useful service? No, he is crucified with Christ and bound to die by a lingering but certain death!¹⁰ The capital sentence is passed upon him, for he cannot be mended and, therefore, must be ended. 'The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither, indeed, can be'. You cannot change

⁸ Except, as I explained in the body of the book, the sinner is still human.

⁹ Spurgeon sermon number 881.

¹⁰ I let this stand, but the old man (the sinner in Adam) and the new man (the believer in Christ) are mutually exclusive. The moment a sinner believes he is no longer an 'old man'.

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the old nature! It is immutably bad and the sooner it is put away as a filthy and unclean thing, the better for us! The believer, so far as he is in Christ, is a new creation! He is not the old stuff put into a new fashion, or the old material worked up into an improved form, but absolutely a new creation! To create is to make out of nothing and that is precisely how the newborn life came into us. It is not a development, or an outgrowth, but a creation – a heavenly something called into being by a power from above. The new man in us is made out of nothing that was in us before, for nature does not assist grace but is opposed to it. Christ has not found light stored away in our darkness, nor life amid the corruption of our spiritual death! The new birth is from above and the life produced thereby is a new creation and not the goodness of nature educated till it becomes grace!... The new man in Christ is not the old creature washed and put out to school and elevated by 'modern thought and culture'... Mark you, it is not said that the man has something new about him, but he, himself, is new! It is not merely that in a spiritual sense he has new eyes, new hands and new feet – but he, he, he, he, himself, is a new creation! Mark that!... The creature is not a new specimen of the same kind as the old, but another and different creation! We might almost read the text as if it said: 'If any man is in Christ, he is a fresh creation, a new kind of creature altogether'.¹¹

¹¹ Spurgeon sermon number 1328.