

Puritan Perspectives For Ministry

Describe and evaluate the “spirituality” of John Owen’s *Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually-Minded*.

Whilst it is not unquestionable, John Owen’s “spirituality” in *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually-Minded* might do much to reform Christian spirituality, so-called Christian spiritualities and the many bogus spiritualities available today¹.

Owen’s “Spirituality”

Owen might approve of some methodological observations:

Though the term spirituality is ubiquitous today, it is notoriously difficult to define², often being little more than a term of approval. As Carson comments: “... “spirituality” has become such an ill-defined, amorphous entity that it covers all kinds of phenomena that an earlier generation of Christians [and here we must include Owen], more given to robust *thought* than is the present generation, would have dismissed as error, or even as “paganism” or “heathenism”.”³ .

As it is attuned both to the Puritans and the present, Wallace’s description of spirituality may prove especially useful here: “Spirituality is the communion of persons with the divine, with emphasis on the nature of the devotion by which the divine is approached. It should be distinguished on the one hand from morality and dogma and on the other from religious institutions, though it is intertwined with both of these: patterns of moral behaviour and belief are closely related to spirituality as a cause or consequence, and such institutional religious realities as worship and fellowship may be regarded as aspects of spirituality. Perhaps the most similar concept is that of piety, when the latter is understood not in the classical sense of reverence for the gods but is taken instead to designate a whole style or manner of “being religious”..... spirituality is an aspect of much religious experience....”⁴.

We must be cautious of anachronisms and false identifications here. Of course, in *The Grace and Duty*, Owen does not (and could not!) as such purport to be treating “spirituality” as the twenty-first century may define it, still less to give a systematic or exhaustive treatment of it or even of its nearest seventeenth century approximation. Formally Owen expounds Romans 8:6, though one may quibble with his interpretation⁵

¹ For a survey of some contemporary spiritualities see Raiter, Michael, *Stirrings of the Soul: Evangelicals and the New Spirituality* UK edition (London, The Good Book Company, 2003), chapter 1, ‘The Spirituality Explosion’.

² See, for example, Marian Raikes’ collection of twelve definitions of spirituality (2004), attached.

³ Carson, D. A. *The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester, Apollos, 1996), p555.

⁴ Wallace, Jr., Dewey D., *The Spirituality of the Later English Puritans: an anthology*, (Macon, Mercer University Press, 1987), pxi.

⁵ For example, it might be debated whether the “peace” of this verse should be taken objectively or subjectively (as Owen often takes it as, for example: “All things are quiet and secure in the mind; there is order and peace in the whole soul, in all its faculties and all their operations” (Chapter 21)) or both, though such a consideration need not be central to an evaluation of Owen’s spirituality as such. See

and his claim that it is “in compliance with the text *from whence the whole is eduved*” (chapter 21, emphasis added) may seem a little stretched.

The term “spirituality” appears fifteen times in *The Grace and Duty*, nine of which are in chapter sixteen which treats (as the heading has it) “Assimilation unto things heavenly and spiritual in affections spiritually renewed -- This assimilation the work of faith; how, and whereby -- Reasons of the want of growth in our spiritual affections as unto this assimilation.” “Spirituality” is not used in its modern sense but is often paired with “heavenliness”, “holiness” or “growth in grace”: “...the growth of our affections in spirituality and heavenliness” (chapter 16) is a fairly typical usage, and for Owen it usually seems to mean “spiritualness” or less frequently “(a) spiritual nature”.

Despite this terminological disjunction, we will find *Puritan Perspectives for Ministry* today here as there is much that modern spirituality could learn from Owen.

God-oriented

Owen’s spirituality is utterly theocentric. Packer identifies this as a major strength of Owen’s spirituality, and the Puritan movement of which he is a particularly great representative, whom modern Evangelicals would do well to hear again: “...whereas to the Puritans communion with God”, the heart of Wallace’s definition of spirituality, it will be recalled, “was a *great* thing, to evangelicals today it is a comparatively *small* thing.” Owen shows a daily experience of God and the inner realities of fellowship with God: “...the experimental piety of the Puritans was natural and unselfconscious, because it was so utterly God-centred, our own (such as it is) is too often artificial and boastful, because it is so largely concerned with ourselves.... The pervasive God-centeredness of Puritan accounts of spiritual experience is a proof of their authenticity, and a source of their power to present God is the modern reader.”⁶

For Owen: “the absolute foundation and spring of all spiritual things... [is] God himself. He is the fountain whence all these things proceed, and the ocean wherein they issue; he is their center and circumference, wherein they all begin, meet, and end.” (Chapter 8).

So it follows that our spirituality must be God centred. Our hearts are to be set on God: “God himself, — that is, as revealed in and by Christ, — is in the first and chiefest place the proper and adequate object of our affections as they are renewed. He is so for himself, or his own sake alone. This is the spring, the center, and chief object of our love. He that loves not God for himself, — that is, for what he is in himself, and what from himself alone he is and will be unto us in Christ (which considerations are inseparable), — hath no true affection for any spiritual thing whatever.” (Chapter 13)

further for example, Moo, Douglas, *The Epistle to the Romans* The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996) p487f who argues that “the words [life and peace] do not denote a subjective state of mind (e.g., “peace of mind and heart”) but the objective reality of the salvation into which the believer, who has “the mind of the Spirit,” has entered. The “peace” here is that “peace with God” given through justification (see 5:1; c.f. also 14:17), the state that is in contrast to the non-Christian’s “enmity towards God” (see v.7).”

⁶ Packer, ‘The Spirituality of John Owen’ (pp251ff) in Packer, J. I., *Among God’s Giants: The Puritan Vision of The Christian Life* (Eastbourne, Kingsway, 1991), pp282-4.

It is to God himself that the believer is to look for ““that which keeps us growing in Christ to maturity’.”, Marian Raikes’ preferred definition of spirituality⁷: “We are always to come unto God as unto an eternal spring of goodness, grace, and mercy, of all that our souls do stand in need of, of all we can desire in order unto our everlasting blessedness.” (Chapter 15)

All life is thus to be considered in relation to God: “In other spiritual things, renewed affections do cleave unto them according as God is in them. God alone is loved for himself; all other things for him, in the measure and degree of his presence in them.” (Chapter 13)

Owen’s spirituality, then, is not an escapist⁸ retreat into privatised contemplation of the beatific vision of God since he sees all reality as interconnected in God himself. Owen’s theocentric spirituality is fully engaged and profoundly world affirming since “affections spiritually renewed... comprehend God in Christ, and all other things as deriving from him and tending unto him” (Chapter 19) Thus, for example, the believer may have a “lawful use and enjoyment of earthly things, so as not to adhere unto them with inordinate affection” by recalling that they are God’s creation and possession, gifts to the believer to be held in stewardship (Chapter 11).

To think of God will cause the believer to live spiritually in practice. Owen articulates how one can seek to live constantly consciously before God, by, as it were, preaching to oneself, thus: “God is in this place; the darkness is no darkness unto him, light and darkness are with him both alike, — are sufficient considerations to lay in the balance against any temptation springing out of secrecy and opportunity. One thought of the actual presence of the holy God and the open view of his all-seeing eye will do more to cool those affections which lust may put into a tumult on such occasions than any other consideration whatever. A speedy retreat hereunto, upon the first perplexing thought wherewith temptation assaults the soul, will be its strong tower, where it shall be safe.” (Chapter 9).

Christ-focused

As will already be clear from the above quotations, Owen’s spirituality is God-oriented but Christ focused.

God cannot be known without the mediation of Christ: “We can never have an immediate enjoyment of God in the immensity of his nature, nor can any created understanding conceive any such thing. God’s communications of himself unto us and

⁷ Raikes, Marian, *Presenting Everyone Mature: Evangelicals and Spiritual Growth* (Orthos 21, 2004), p17.

⁸ C.f. Peter Toon’s comment: “... [Owen’s]... mind was much taken up with meditation upon the Person of Christ, and of heaven. To some this may appear as a form of escapism but to the Christian it is the goal of all theology.” in Toon, Peter, *God’s Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1973), p168

our enjoyment of him shall be in and by the manifestation of his glory in Christ.” (Chapter 6)⁹.

As a thoroughly Trinitarian theologian¹⁰, if we would know God as he truly is in himself, Owen would have us look to Christ: “What, then, is the principal present object of faith as it is evangelical, into whose room sight must succeed? Is it not the manifestation of the glory of the infinite wisdom, grace, love, kindness, and power of God in Christ, the revelation of the eternal counsels of his will and the ways of their accomplishment, unto the eternal salvation of the church, in and by him, with the glorious exaltation of Christ himself?” (Chapter 6).

Not just knowledge about Christ but deliberate delight of the affections in him, perhaps sometimes neglected by today’s conservative Evangelicals¹¹, is Owen’s spiritual methodology: “Where affections are spiritually renewed, the person of Christ is the center of them;...God, even the Father, presents not himself in his beauty and amiableness as the object of our affections, but as he is in Christ, acting his love in him, 1 John 4:8,9” (Chapter 18).

The Biblical expression “God in Christ” is at the heart of Owen’s spirituality as it is in the economy of salvation and strikingly Owen argues that it will be thus even in glory: “The infinite, incomprehensible excellencies of the divine nature are not proposed in Scripture as the immediate object of our faith; nor shall they be so unto sight in heaven. The manifestation of them in Christ is the immediate object of our faith here, and shall be of our sight hereafter...The glory of heaven which the gospel prepares us for, which faith leads and conducts us unto, which the souls of believers long after, as that which will give full rest, satisfaction, and complacency, is the full, open, perfect manifestation of the glory of the wisdom, goodness, and love of God in Christ, in his person and mediation, with the revelation of all his counsels concerning them, and the communication of their effects unto us” (Chapter 6).

Not only is it in Christ that we know God, but the human Jesus in his earthly life is the model of authentic spirituality: “The pattern which we ought continually to bear in our eyes, whereunto our affections ought to be conformed, is Jesus Christ and the affections of his holy soul” (Chapter 18).

⁹ See e.g. Frame, John M., *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, P&R, 2002) pp200-207 for a helpful nuanced account of God’s incomprehensibility and knowability.

¹⁰ See esp. Trueman, Carl, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen’s Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1998).

¹¹ We may compare further Owen’s emphasis at the start of *The Grace and Duty* on: “A complacency of mind, from that gust, relish, and savor, which it finds in spiritual things, from their suitableness unto its constitution, inclinations, and desires. There is a salt in spiritual things, whereby they are ... made savory unto a renewed mind; though to others they are as the white of an egg, that hath no taste or savor in it. In this gust and relish lies the sweetness and satisfaction of spiritual life. Speculative notions about spiritual things, when they are alone, are dry, sapless, and barren. In this gust we taste by experience that God is gracious, and that the love of Christ is better than wine, or whatever else hath the most grateful relish unto a sensual appetite. This is the proper foundation of that “joy which is unspeakable and full of glory.”” (Chapter 1).

Thus we are to reflect on how Jesus lived that we might be made like him. For example: “What pity and compassion had he for the souls of men, yea, for the whole human kind, in all their sufferings, pains, and distresses! How were all his affections always in perfection of order, under the conduct of the spirit of his mind! Hence was his self-denial, his contempt of the world, his readiness for the cross, to do or suffer according to the will of God. If this pattern be continually before us, it will put forth a transforming efficacy to change us into the same image. When we find our minds liable unto any disorders, cleaving inordinately unto the things of this world, moved with intemperate passions, vain and frothy in conversation, darkened or disturbed by the fumes of distempered lusts, let us call things to an account, and ask of ourselves whether this be the frame of mind that was in Christ Jesus. This, therefore, is an evidence that our affections are spiritually renewed, and that they have received some progress in an assimilation unto heavenly things, — namely, when the soul is delighted in making Christ their pattern in all things.” (Chapter 18).

We might say that Owen’s is a “What Would Jesus Do”, or perhaps better a “What Did Jesus Do” Spirituality.

Scripture-governed

It is thus the Christ of the Bible on whom true spirituality is focused. Safeguarding against sub-Christian spiritualities, Owen directs: “In your thoughts of Christ, be very careful that they are conceived and directed according to the rule of the word, lest you deceive your own souls, and give up the conduct of your affections unto vain imaginations.” (Chapter 7).

Citing Revelation 2 & 3, Owen argues that Jesus addresses believers today with the words of Scripture by the Spirit: “He that spake thus unto the churches of old speaks now the same unto us; for he lives forever, and is always the same, and his word is living and unchangeable. There is not one of us who are under this frame, but the Lord Christ by his word and Spirit testifieth his displeasure against us” (Chapter 17).

Owen encourages his readers to meditate on Christ from particular Bible passages, a practice which Evangelicals would do well to rehabilitate given the confusions of Eastern and New Age “spiritualities” which often surround “meditation” today: “For more fixed thoughts and meditations, take some express place of Scripture wherein he is set forth and proposed, either in his person, office, or grace, unto you, Galatians 3:1” (Chapter 7).

Human spirituality is to be governed by the Word of God: “The rule of our affections in their utmost spiritual improvement is the Scripture” (Chapter 18).

Here indeed is a spirituality of the Word: “The law, or the word of God, is the only way of the revelation of God and his will unto us, and the only outward way and rule of our converse and communion with him. Wherefore, to love the law is the principal part of our being heavenly minded, yea, virtually that which comprehends the whole.” (Chapter 21).

Thoroughly applied

Owen's spirituality in *The Grace and Duty* is detailed, rigorous, serious, worked-out, practical, adapted to varieties of readers and applied.

Owen gives much helpful spiritual direction which demonstrates psychological penetration. For example he memorably and evocatively urges believers "in that journey or pilgrimage [a favourite Puritan metaphor] wherein we are engaged towards a heavenly country" to be specific rather than merely general in their thoughts of the kingdom for which they are destined, with the following figure: "Suppose sundry persons engaged in a voyage unto a most remote country, wherein all of them have an apprehension that there is a place of rest and an inheritance provided for them. Under this apprehension they all put themselves upon their voyage, to possess what is so prepared. Howbeit some of them have only a general notion of these things; they know nothing distinctly concerning them, and are so busied about other affairs that they have no leisure to inquire into them, or do suppose that they cannot come unto any satisfactory knowledge of them in particular, and so are content to go on with general hopes and expectations. Others there are who by all possible means acquaint themselves particularly with the nature of the climate whither they are going, with the excellency of the inheritance and provision that is made for them. Their voyage proves long and wearisome, their difficulties many, and their dangers great, and they have nothing to relieve and encourage themselves with but the hope and expectation of the country whither they are going. Those of the first sort will be very apt to despond and faint, their general hopes will not be able to relieve them; but those who have a distinct notion and apprehension of the state of things whither they are going, and of their incomparable excellency, have always in a readiness wherewith to cheer their minds and support themselves." (Chapter 5).

Similarly, Owen argues that when Satan tempts us to sin we should think not of the sin itself but of sin's guilt that we might be humbled and sin's power than we might be moved to seek strength to withstand it (Chapter 10)¹².

Owen urges the believer to seek to make daily progress, speaking of "a necessity of making a daily progress in spirituality and heavenly mindedness, whereby the inward man may be renewed day by day, and grace augmented with the increase of God." (Chapter 16).

Individualistic?

Owen applies his spirituality thoroughly to the individual believer and one might have hoped for further applications to the household, the church, communities and nation. Certainly Owen is alive to social duties as he shows in his opposition to the bogus spiritualities of Roman Catholic: "And there was a time when superstition had so much power on the minds of men, that multitudes were persuaded to forsake, to give up, all their interest in relations, callings, goods, possessions, and betake themselves unto

¹² A point brought out in Ferguson's helpful summary on spiritual mindedness (chapter 10 section 2) in Ferguson, Sinclair B., *John Owen On The Christian Life* (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987) p314.

tedious pilgrimages, yea, hard services in war, to comply with that superstition; and it is not to the glory of our profession that we have so few instances of men parting with all, and giving up themselves unto heavenly retirement. But I am at present on no such design; I aim not to take men out of their lawful earthly occasions, but to bring spiritual affections and thoughts into the management of them all.” (Chapter 10). Owen argues spiritual mindedness is to be lived out in society and withdrawal to a monastery would be a clear sin if it conflicted with other duties. Study of Owen’s other works also shows that the focus of his spirituality (which we have seen is related to ethics) is not merely individualistic. For example, as Wallace points out, Owen argued that without the “grace” of charity to the poor, all religion was vain.”¹³ and the *Sermons To The Nation* show a concern for “spirituality” in national life.

Assurance?

The Grace and Duty may trouble the assurance of some believers. Owen urges self-examination so that one might know whether or not one is truly spiritually minded, that is, having the new life of the spirit implanted in one’s soul. The reader is urged to scrutinise his own thoughts: do spiritual thoughts occur naturally to him without external stimulus, does he repose and abound in them? We are cautioned that the unregenerate may be moved to considerable apparent spirituality without the reality. Owen seems to envisage the work of temporary conviction frequently without the subsequent work of conversion. Owen is careful to say that: “I do not say that our assurance and peace with God do arise wholly from the actings of grace in us; there are other causes of them, where-into they are principally resolved;” (Chapter 17) and recognises that believers will progress and different rates and suffer set backs from time to time (Chapter 21). Yet his sustained focus on the individual’s own thoughts to judge the person’s “spiritualness” is probably not helpful. Ironically, Owen’s great call is to think on Christ and this turn to the self could risk a dropping of the sight from him.

Our spirituality

Owen offers us God-oriented, Christ-focused, Scripture-governed perspectives on spirituality which he would urge us to apply thoroughly in our own ministries today.

¹³ Wallace, Jr., Dewey D., *The Spirituality of the Later English Puritans: an anthology*, (Macon, Mercer University Press, 1987), pxvi.

Bibliography

Barker, William, *Puritan Profiles: 54 Contemporaries of the Westminster Assembly* (Fearn, Mentor, 1996)

Brown, John, *The English Puritans: The Rise and Fall of the Puritan Movement* (Fearn, Christian Focus, 1998) First published 1910.

Carson, D. A. *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester, Apollos, 1996)

Oliver, Robert W. (ed.), *John Owen – the man and his theology: papers read at the conference of The John Owen Centre for Theological Study September 2000* (Darlington, Evangelical Press, 2002)

Ferguson, Sinclair B., *John Owen On The Christian Life* (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987)

Frame, John M., *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, P&R, 2002)

Moo, Douglas, *The Epistle to the Romans The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996)

Owen, John, *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded* at http://www.reformed.org/books/owen/vol7/spiritual_000.html

Owen, John, *The Works of John Owen* (London, The Banner of Truth, 1965) ed. Goold, William H.

Packer, J. I., *Among God's Giants: The Puritan Vision of The Christian Life* (Eastbourne, Kingsway, 1991)

Packer, James I., 'An introduction to systematic spirituality' (1990) and 'Evangelical foundations for spirituality' (1991) in *Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer, volume 2, serving the people of God* (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1998)

Raikes, Marian, *Presenting Everyone Mature: Evangelicals and Spiritual Growth* (Orthos 21, 2004)

Raiter, Michael, *Stirrings of the Soul: Evangelicals and the New Spirituality* UK edition (London, The Good Book Company, 2003)

Spurr, John, *English Puritanism 1603-1698* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998)

Tiller, John, *Puritan, Pietist and Pentecostalist: Three Types of Evangelical Spirituality* (Nottingham, Grove Spirituality Series No. 3, 1982)

Toon, Peter, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1973)

Trueman, Carl, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1998)

Wallace, Jr., Dewey D., *The Spirituality of the Later English Puritans: an anthology*, (Macon, Mercer University Press, 1987)

Watkins, Owen C., *The Puritan Experience* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1972)