

The Spirituality of John Owen

by J. I. Packer

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The Puritan John Owen, who comes closer than anyone else to being the hero of this book, was one of the greatest of English theologians. In an age of giants, he overtopped them all. C.H. Spurgeon called him the prince of divines. He is hardly known today, and we are the poorer for our ignorance.

Owen was born in 1616, in the Oxfordshire village of Stadham, where his father was the hardworking, uncompromising Puritan vicar. Welsh blood ran in his veins, which may partly account for one of the qualities that make his writings distinctive, namely the grand scale on which he portrays, on the one hand, the greatness of God and the need for the deepest humility before him and, on the other hand, the poignant inward drama of the individual facing the issues of eternity—for Celtic evangelicals regularly outstrip their more matter-of-fact Anglo-Saxon peers in their grasp of these things. He entered Queen's College, Oxford, at the age of twelve, and took his MA in 1635. He studied ferociously hard, driven forward by his ambitions after political or ecclesiastical eminence; but, though a churchman, he was not yet a Christian in the true sense. In his early twenties, however, God showed him his sins, and the torment of conviction threw him into such a turmoil that for three months he avoided the company of others and, when addressed, could scarcely utter a coherent sentence. Slowly he learned to trust Christ, and so found peace.

In 1637, by reason of conscientious objections to Chancellor Laud's statutes, he left the university, and with it, as far as he could foresee, all hope of advancement. But after Laud's fall, under the Long Parliament, he rose rapidly and in 1651 was made Dean of Christ Church, becoming Vice-Chancellor of the university the following year. Oxford had been the Royalist headquarters during the Civil War, and Owen found the university bankrupt and in chaos. He reorganised it, however, with conspicuous success. After 1660, he led the Independents through the bitter years of persecution. He was offered the presidency of Harvard, but declined. He died in 1683, after years of martyrdom to asthma and gallstones.¹

The epitaph engraved on the monument that adorns Owen's tomb in Bunhill Fields reflects the respect in which he was held by his contemporaries, and indicates something of his quality as a man of God and a teacher of godliness. Here is a translation:²

¹ For details on Owen's Life, see Peter Toon, *God's Statesman* (Paternoster Press: Exeter, 1971); A. Thomson, 'Life of Dr. Owen' in Owen, *Works*, I:xxi-cxii.

² The Latin text is in Owen, *Works* I:cxiii f. The 'translation' offered there and reproduced in Toon, *op cit*, pp 182f, is not a translation in the ordinary present-day sense, but a loose explanatory amplification. 24 August, St Bartholomew's Day, had been made 'dreadful' by the Huguenot massacre of 1572 and the Puritan ejections of 1662.

John Owen, born in Oxfordshire, son of a distinguished theologian, was himself a more distinguished one, who must be counted among the most distinguished of this age. Furnished with the recognised resources of humane learning in uncommon measure, he put them all, as a well-ordered array of handmaids, at the service of theology, which he served himself. His theology was polemical, practical, and what is called casuistical, and it cannot be said that any one of these was peculiarly his rather than another.

In polemical theology, with more than herculean strength, he strangled three poisonous serpents, the Arminian, the Socinian, and the Roman.

In practical theology, he laid out before others the whole of the activity of the Holy Spirit, which he had first experienced in his own heart, according to the rule of the Word. And, leaving other things aside, he cultivated, and realised in practice, the blissful communion with God of which he wrote; a traveller on earth who grasped God like one in heaven.

In casuistry, he was valued as an oracle to be consulted on every complex matter.

A scribe instructed in every way for the kingdom of God, this pure lamp of gospel truth shone forth on many in private, on more from the pulpit, and on all in his printed works, pointing everyone to the same goal. And in this shining forth he gradually, as he and others recognized, squandered his strength till it was gone. His holy soul, longing to enjoy God more, left the shattered ruins of his once-handsome body, full of permanent weaknesses, attacked by frequent diseases, worn out most of all by hard work, and no longer a fit instrument for serving God, on a day rendered dreadful for many by earthly powers but now made happy for him through the power of God, August 25, 1683. He was 67.

This encomium brings before us all the themes and motifs that will occupy us in the present study.

Owen was a theologian of enormous intellectual energy. His knowledge and memory were vast, and he had an unusual power of organising his material. His thought was not subtle nor complicated, as, for instance, was Baxter's. His ideas, like Norman pillars, leave in the mind an impression of massive grandeur precisely by reason of the solid simplicity of their structure. Of their content, it is enough to say that for method and substance Owen reminds one frequently of Calvin, frequently too of the *Westminster* and *Savoy Confessions* (the *Savoy* is in fact the *Westminster*, lightly revised, mainly by Owen himself), and time and again of all three together; he is constantly and consciously near the centre of seventeenth-century Reformed thought throughout. His studied unconcern about style in presenting his views, a conscientious protest against the self-conscious literary posturing of the age, conceals their uncommon clarity and straightforwardness from superficial readers; but then, Owen did not write for superficial readers. He wrote, rather, for those who, once they take up a subject, cannot rest till they see to the bottom of it, and who find exhaustiveness not exhausting, but satisfying and refreshing. His

works have been truly described as a series of theological systems, each organised around a different centre. He would never view parts in isolation from the whole.

His spiritual stature matched his intellectual gifts. ‘Holiness’, said David Clarkson in his funeral sermon, ‘gave a divine lustre to his other accomplishments, it stirred in his whole course, and was diffused throughout his conversation.’³ Owen’s holiness—that is, the habitual Christlikeness that people saw in him—had a twofold source. First, as noted above, he was a *humble* man. ‘There are two things that are suited to humble the souls of men,’ he wrote; ‘. . . due consideration of God, and then of ourselves. Of God, in his greatness, glory, holiness, power, majesty and authority; of ourselves, in our mean, abject and sinful condition.’⁴ God taught Owen to consider both: to let God, the Sovereign Creator, be God in his thought and life, and to recognise his own guilt and uncleanness. The latter, he held, was especially important; ‘the man that understands the evil of his own heart, how vile it is, is the only useful, fruitful and solidly believing and obedient person. . . .’⁵ A man must abhor himself before he can serve God aright. Owen, proud by nature, had been brought low in and by his conversion, and thereafter he kept himself low by recurring contemplation of his inbred sinfulness.

Again, Owen *knew the power of his gospel*. Preachers, he held, must have ‘experience of the power of the truth which they preach in and upon their own souls. . . . man preacheth that sermon only well unto others which preacheth itself in his own soul.’⁶ Therefore he made this rule:

I hold myself bound in conscience and in honour, not even to imagine that I have attained a proper knowledge of any one article of truth, much less to publish it, unless through the Holy Spirit I have had such a taste of it, in its spiritual sense, that I may be able, from the heart, to say with the psalmist, ‘I have believed, and therefore have I spoken.’⁷

Hence the authority and skill with which he probes the dark depth of the human heart. ‘Whole passages flash upon the mind of the reader’, wrote A. Thomson of his *Temptation*, ‘with an influence that makes him feel as if they had been written for himself alone.’⁸ When Rabbi Duncan told his students to read Owen’s *Indwelling Sin* he added: ‘But prepare for the knife.’

Owen’s style is often stigmatised as cumbersome and tortuous. Actually it is a Latinised spoken style, fluent but stately and expansive, in the elaborate Ciceronian manner. When Owen’s prose is read aloud, as didactic rhetoric (which is, after all, what it is), the verbal inversions, displacements, archaisms and new coinages that bother modern

³ David Clarkson, *A Funeral Sermon on the Much Lamented Death of the Late Reverend and Learned Divine John Owen D.D.* (London, 1720); cited from Toon, *op cit*, p 173.

⁴ Owen, *Works*, VI:200.

⁵ *Ibid*, VI:201.

⁶ *Ibid*, XVI:76.

⁷ *Ibid*, X:488.

⁸ *Ibid*, I:lxxvi.

readers cease to obscure and offend. Those who think as they read find Owen's expansiveness suggestive and his fulsomeness fertilising. 'Owen is said to be prolix,' wrote Spurgeon, 'but it would be truer to say that he is condensed. His style is heavy because he gives notes of what he might have said, and passes on without fully developing the great thoughts of his capacious mind. He requires hard study, and none of us ought to grudge it.'⁹ I shall not dispute Spurgeon's verdict; I hope that my readers will not dispute it, either.

2

We now focus attention on John Owen's central teaching about the Christian life. For this I draw material mainly from his sermonic treatises on *Indwelling Sin*, *Mortification of Sin*, and *Temptation*, and his more highly wrought *Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit*.

The Puritan teachers as a body constantly insisted that realistic self-knowledge is a *sine qua non* for living the Christian life, and Owen is no exception. There are four items of self-knowledge of which he never tires of reminding the believer:

First, the Christian is a *man*, created for rational action and equipped to that end with a trinity of faculties: understanding, will and affection. (1) 'The mind or understanding is the leading faculty of the soul . . . office is to guide, direct, choose and lead'; 'it is the eye of the soul.'¹⁰ (2) As the mind is a power of apprehension, so the will is a power of action: 'a rational appetite: rational as guided by the mind, and an appetite as excited by the affections . . . chooseth nothing but *sub ratione boni*, as it hath an appearance of good. . . . God is its natural and necessary object.'¹¹ (Owen here builds on the traditional scholastic doctrine that what is *good* is also desirable, and that objects are actually desired in virtue of the goodness, real or illusory, which is attributed to them. One who truly appreciates God's goodness, therefore, cannot but desire him; and desire, Owen holds, is the root and heart of love.) (3) The affections are the various dispositional 'drives', positive and negative, with their emotional overtones—love, hope, hate, fear and so on—which elicit choices by drawing man to or repelling him from particular objects. No choice is ever made without some degree of affection. Therefore 'affections are in the soul, as the helm is in the ship; if it be laid hold on by a skilful hand, it turneth the whole vessel which way he pleaseth.'¹² What enlists affection wins the man; 'it is in vain to contend with anything that hath the power of our affections in its disposal; it will prevail at the last.'¹³

Man was made to know good with his mind, to desire it, once he has come to know it, with his affections, and to cleave to it, once he has felt its attraction, with his

⁹ C.H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries* (Banner of Truth: London, 1969), p 103.

¹⁰ Owen, *Works*, VI:213, 216.

¹¹ *Ibid*, VI:254.

¹² *Ibid*, VII:397.

¹³ *Loc cit*.

will; the good in this case being God, his truth and his law. God accordingly moves us, not by direct action on the affections or will, but by addressing our mind with his word, and so bringing to bear on us the force of truth. Our first task, therefore, if we would serve God, is to learn the contents of ‘God’s Word written’.¹⁴ Affection may be the helm of the ship, but the mind must steer; and the chart to steer by is God’s revealed truth.

Consequently, it is the preacher’s first task to teach his flock the doctrines of the Bible, eschewing emotionalism (the attempt to play directly on the affections) and addressing himself constantly to the mind. Owen habitually spoke of himself as a *teacher*, and conducted his own ministry on these principles, as his published sermons and practical treatises show.

Second, the Christian is a *fallen* man. Sin not only alienated him from God, but also from himself. The fruit of sin is disorder in the soul and disintegration of the character: ‘the faculties move cross and contrary one to another; the will chooseth not the good which the mind discovers . . . the affections . . . the sovereignty, and draw the whole soul captive after them.’¹⁵ Fallen man is no longer rational, but unstable, inconstant, distracted by conflicting passions and blind impulses, and ‘without strength’ to obey God (Rom 5:6). For the root of sin is an ingrained disaffection and antipathy towards the Creator (Rom 8:7), an irrational ingrained lust to dodge, defy, and disobey him. Of indwelling sin, Owen wrote: ‘its nature and formal design is to oppose God; God as a lawgiver, God as holy, God as the author of the gospel, a way of salvation by grace and not by works, are the direct object of the law of sin.’¹⁶ Ungodliness, unrighteousness, unbelief and heresy are its natural forms of self-expression. It pervades and pollutes the whole man: ‘it adheres as a depraved principle unto our minds, in darkness and vanity; unto our affections in sensuality; unto our wills, in a loathing of, and aversion from, that which is good; and . . . continually putting itself upon us, in inclinations, motions, or suggestions, to evil.’¹⁷ And, as we shall see, it resists the whole work of grace, from first to last: ‘when Christ comes with his spiritual power upon the soul to conquer it to himself, he hath no quiet landing place. He can set foot on no ground but what he must fight for.’¹⁸

Christian living, therefore, must be founded upon self-abhorrence and self-distrust because of indwelling sin’s presence and power. Self-confidence and self-satisfaction argue self-ignorance. The only healthy Christian is the humble, broken-hearted Christian:

Constant self-abasement, condemnation, and abhorrency, is another duty that is directly opposed unto the . . . rule of sin in the soul. No frame of mind is a better antidote against the poison of sin. . . . It is the soil wherein all grace will thrive and flourish. A constant due sense of sin as sin, of our interest therein by nature, and in the course of our lives, with a continual

¹⁴ A phrase from Anglican Article XX.

¹⁵ Owen, *Works*, VI:173.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, VI:178.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, VI:157.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, VI:181.

afflictive remembrance of . . . instances of it . . . is the soul's best posture . . . keep our souls in a constant state of mourning and self-abasement is the most necessary part of our wisdom . . . and it is so far from having any inconsistency with those consolations and joys, which the gospel tenders unto us in believing, as that it is the only way to let them into the soul in a due manner.¹⁹

Third, the Christian is a *redeemed* man. He was one of those for whom Christ became surety in the eternal 'covenant of redemption', to pay his debts, to earn him life, and to free him from sin's guilt, and who now lives to deliver him from sin's power. Redemption by Christ is the heart of Christian doctrine, and faith and love to Christ must be the heart of Christian devotion. With Thomas Goodwin and Samuel Rutherford, Owen saw this as clearly as any man has ever seen it.

They know nothing of the life and power of the gospel, nothing of the reality of the grace of God, nor do they believe aright one article of the Christian faith, whose hearts are not sensible of the love of Christ herein. Nor is he sensible of the love of Christ, whose affections are not therein drawn out unto him. I say, they make a pageant of religion . . . whose hearts are not really affected with the love of Christ, in the susception and discharge of the work of mediation, so as to have real and spiritually sensible affections for him. Men . . . have no real acquaintance with Christianity, who imagine that the placing of the most intense affections of our souls on the person of Christ, the loving him with all our hearts because of his love, our being overcome thereby, until we are sick of love, the constant motions of our souls towards him with delight and adherence, are but fancies and imaginations.²⁰

Fourth, the Christian is a *regenerate* man, a new creature in Christ. A new principle of life, and habit of obedience, has been implanted in him. This is the prophesied 'circumcision of the heart'. 'Whereas the blindness, obstinacy, and stubbornness in sin, that is in us by nature, with the prejudices which possess our minds and affections, hinder us from conversion unto God, by this circumcision they are taken away',²¹ and man's first act of true, saving faith in Jesus Christ, his conscious 'conversion', is its immediate result. This act, though directly caused by the Spirit's regenerative operation in the depths of his being, is perfectly free (i.e., deliberate): 'in order of nature, the acting of grace in the will in our conversion is antecedent unto its own acting; though in the same instant of time wherein the will is moved, it moves; and when it is acted, it acts itself, and preserves its own liberty in its exercise.'²²

¹⁹ *Ibid*, VII:532f.

²⁰ *Ibid*, I:166f.

²¹ *Ibid*, III:324.

²² *Ibid*, III:320.

Regeneration makes man's heart a battlefield, where 'the flesh' (the old man) tirelessly disputes the supremacy of 'the spirit' (the new man). The Christian cannot gratify the one without interference from the other (Gal 5:17; Rom 7:23). Sin, from which by repentance he has formally dissociated himself, seems to take on a life of its own; Paul likens it 'to a person, a living person, called "the old man," with his faculties and properties, his wisdom, craft, subtlety, strength.'²³ It is always at work in the heart; a temporary lull in its assaults means, not that it is dead, but that it is very much alive. 'Sin is never less quiet, than when it seems to be most quiet, and its waters are for the most part deep, when they are still.'²⁴ Its strategy is to induce a false sense of security as a prelude to a surprise attack.

By sin we are oftentimes, ere we are aware, carried into distempered affections, foolish imaginations, and pleasing delightfulness in things that are not good nor profitable. When the soul is doing . . . quite another thing . . . sin starts that in the heart . . . that carries it away into that which is evil and sinful. Yea, to manifest its power, sometimes when the soul is seriously engaged in the mortification of any sin, it will, by one means or other, lead it away into a dalliance with that very sin whose ruin it is seeking. . . . I know no greater burden in the life of a believer than these involuntary surprisals. . . . And it is in respect unto them, that the apostle makes his complaint, Rom. 7:24.²⁵

The fight with sin is lifelong.

Sometimes a soul thinks or hopes that it may through grace be utterly free from this troublesome inmate. Upon some secret enjoyment of God, some full supply of grace, some return from wandering, some deep affliction, some thorough humiliation, the poor soul begins to hope that it shall now be freed from the law of sin. But after a while . . . sin acts again, makes good its old station.²⁶

And the man who claims perfection is self-deceived, and riding for a fall. 'You'll never get out of the seventh of Romans while I'm your minister,' Alexander Whyte once told his Edinburgh congregation; and Owen, could he have stepped forward two and a half centuries to stand in Whyte's shoes, would have told them the same.

²³ *Ibid*, VI:8.

²⁴ *Ibid*, VI:11.

²⁵ *Ibid*, VI:192f.

²⁶ *Ibid*, IV:204.

3

God's purpose for the Christian during his life on earth is *sanctification*. So said Calvin; so says Owen; and so says Holy Scripture (1 Thess 4:3; 1 Peter 1:15f). In stressing, as he constantly does, the necessity and cruciality of sanctification, Owen is only echoing the New Testament.

Sanctification is an immediate work of the Spirit of God on the souls of believers, purifying and cleansing of their natures from the pollution and uncleanness of sin, renewing in them the image of God, and thereby enabling them from a spiritual and habitual principle of grace, to yield obedience unto God. . . . Or more briefly; it is the universal renovation of our natures by the Holy Spirit into the image of God, through Jesus Christ. Hence it follows, that our *holiness*, which is the fruit and effect of this work . . . as it compriseth the renewed . . . image of God wrought in us, so it consists in a holy obedience unto God, by Jesus Christ, according to the terms of the covenant of grace.²⁷

Thus, 'holiness is nothing but the implanting, writing and realising of the gospel in our souls,'²⁸ 'the word changed into grace in our hearts . . . the Spirit worketh nothing in us, but what the word first requireth of us . . . growth is nothing but . . . increase in conformity to that word.'²⁹ This increase is progressive (or should be) throughout a Christian's life.

Holiness is both God's promised gift and man's prescribed duty: 'neither can we perform our duty herein without the grace of God; nor doth God give us this grace unto any other end but that we may rightly perform our duty.' He who would be holy must have a due regard both to God's law, which is itself holy, just, good and binding, and peremptorily requires of him all those good works of which holiness consists, and to God's promise of strength through Christ to keep this law.

And we have a due regard unto the promise . . . when (1) we walk in a constant sense of our inability to comply with the command . . . from any power in ourselves. . . . (2) When we adore that grace which hath provided help and relief for us. . . . (3) When we act faith in prayer and expectation on the promise for supplies of grace enabling us to holy obedience.³⁰

²⁷ *Ibid*, III:386.

²⁸ *Ibid*, III:370.

²⁹ *Ibid*, III:470.

³⁰ *Ibid*, III:385.

We must pray for help, and fight the good fight of faith in God's strength, and give thanks to him for the victories we win.

Sanctification has a double aspect. Its positive side is *vivification*, the growing and maturing of the new man; its negative side is *mortification*, the weakening and killing of the old man.

We grow in grace by the deliberate stirring up and exercise of the new powers and inclinations which regeneration implanted within us.

Frequency of acts doth naturally increase and strengthen the habits whence they proceed. And in spiritual habits [e.g., faith, hope, love] it is so, moreover, by God's appointment. . . . They grow and thrive in and by their exercise . . . want thereof is the principal means of their decay.³¹

The Christian, therefore, must use the means of grace assiduously, hearing, reading, meditating, watching, praying, worshipping; he must animate himself to 'universal obedience', an all-round, all-day conformity to God's revealed will; and he must persevere in it with resolution and resilience. Yet he must remember that the power is from God, not himself, and do it all in the spirit of prayerful dependence, or else he will fail. For

the actual aid, assistance and internal operation of the Spirit of God is necessary . . . the producing of every holy act of our minds, wills and affection, in every duty whatsoever. . . . Notwithstanding the power or ability which believers have received by habitual grace, they still stand in need of actual grace in . . . every single . . . act or duty towards God.³²

This continual assistance will be withheld from those who forget their need of it and omit to ask for it.

Seeking thus to grow in grace means battling directly against the world, just as mortifying sin means battling directly against the flesh (see the next section). Owen points this up in the preface to *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, in words which, though spoken of the late seventeenth century (the book was published in 1681), seem uncannily applicable to today. Owen wrote:

The world is at present in a mighty hurry, and being in many places cut off from all foundations of steadfastness, it makes the minds of men giddy with its revolutions, or disorderly in the expectations of them . . . hence men walk and talk as if the world were all, when comparatively it is nothing. And when men come with their warmed affections, reeking with thoughts of these things, unto the performance of or attendance unto any spiritual duty, it is very difficult for them, if not impossible, to stir up any grace unto a due and vigorous exercise.³³

³¹ *Ibid*, III:389.

³² *Ibid*, III:529.

Thoughts must therefore be guarded, the heart must be watched, and habits of disciplined meditation formed, or one will never be able to sustain the spiritual-mindedness that is the seed-bed of true growth in the life of grace and holiness.

Mortification is more than the mere suppression, or counteraction, of sinful impulse. It is nothing less than a gradual eradication of it. ‘Mortify’ means ‘kill’, and ‘the end aimed at in this duty is destruction, as it is in all killing: the utter ruin, destruction and gradual annihilation of all the remainders of this cursed life of sin . . . to leave sin with neither being, nor life, nor operation. . . .’³⁴ The sin that indwells the believer was killed in principle on the cross; Christ’s death will in time be its death. It was dethroned in fact by regeneration, and now, with the Spirit’s aid, the Christian is to spend his lifetime draining its lifeblood (Rom 8:13). ‘The whole work is by degrees to be carried on towards perfection all our days.’³⁵ We may never relax, for sin ‘will no otherwise die, but by being gradually and constantly weakened; spare it, and it heals its wounds, and recovers strength.’³⁶ ‘The work . . . in a constant taking part with grace . . . the principle, acts and fruits of sin.’³⁷ It is often painful and ungrateful; Christ compared it to plucking out an eye, or cutting off a limb; but it is the way of life, and it is disastrous to neglect it.

The condition of successful assault on particular sins is, first, maintained humility (‘no frame of mind is a better antidote against the poison of sin’) and, second, sustained growth in grace.

Growing, thriving and improving in universal holiness is the great way of the mortification of sin. The more vigorous the principle of holiness is in us, the more weak, infirm and dying will be that of sin. . . . This is that which will ruin sin, and without it nothing else will contribute anything thereunto.³⁸

Especially, ‘live and abound in the actual exercise of all those graces, which are most directly opposed to those . . . that we are most exercised withal.’³⁹

The activity by which the Christian directly secures the mortification of his sins is prayer. This includes *complaint*, in which he spreads before God his sin and extremity and afflicts his soul by humbly acknowledging how justly his wrongdoing has provoked God’s wrath against him, and *petition*, whereby he earnestly and importunately pleads God’s promises of deliverance and sustains his faith in their accomplishment by recalling those events in which already God has evidenced his love for him. (The Psalms are full of

³³ *Ibid*, III:364.

³⁴ *Ibid*, III:545

³⁵ *Ibid*, VI:8.

³⁶ *Ibid*, III:545.

³⁷ *Ibid*, III:543.

³⁸ *Ibid*, III:552f.

³⁹ *Ibid*, III:554.

examples of this.) The effect of prayer, subjectively, is twofold. First, grace is strengthened. ‘The soul of a believer is never raised to a higher intension of spirit in the pursuit of, love unto, and delight in, holiness, nor is more confirmed unto it or cast into the mould of it, than it is in prayer.’⁴⁰ Second, sin is weakened and withers as the believer looks in faith and love to Christ. ‘Let faith look on Christ in the gospel as he is set forth dying and crucified for us. Look on him under the weight of our sins, praying, bleeding, dying: bring him in that condition into the heart by faith; apply his blood so shed to thy corruptions; do this daily. . . .’⁴¹ Sin nowhere appears so hateful as at Calvary, and lust shrivels up in the Christian’s heart while he keeps Calvary in view. Again:

Christ as crucified is the great object of our love, or should be . . . ib the death of Christ do his love, his grace, his condescension, most gloriously shine forth . . . the effects of love, as of all true love, are first, *Adherence*; secondly, *Assimilation*:—[First] *Adherence*: Love in the Scriptures is frequently expressed by this effect; the soul of one did *cleave*, or was *knit*, unto another. . . . So it produceth a firm adherence unto Christ crucified, that makes a soul to be in some sense always present with Christ on the cross. And hence ensues, [Secondly], *Assimilation*, or conformity. . . . Love . . . beget a likeness between the mind loving and the object beloved. . . . A mind filled with the love of Christ as crucified . . . will be changed into its image and likeness, by the effectual mortification of sin. . . .⁴²

The cross and the Spirit are thus the two focal realities in Owen’s teaching about the Christian life. Christ merited the gift of the Spirit to the elect sinner by dying for him; the Spirit comes to him to show him what the cross reveals of Christ’s love for him, to bring home to him the pardon Christ won for him, to change his heart, and to make him love his Saviour. The Spirit leads us to Christ’s cross, God’s guarantee to us that our sins, so far from bringing about our death eternally, shall themselves die, and brings the cross of Christ into our hearts, with its sin-killing power,⁴³ so ensuring that our sins do die.

It ought to be said before we go further, that this dichotomised scheme of sanctification as a matter of vivifying our graces and mortifying our sins, which Owen sets forth with such masterful and searching brilliance, is not in any way peculiar to him. It is conventional Puritan teaching, going back through Calvin to Romans 6 and Colossians 2:20–3:17. Here, as elsewhere, Owen stands in the main Puritan stream.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, III:560.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, VI:85.

⁴² *Ibid*, III:563f.

⁴³ *Ibid*, VI:86.

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To stop short here, however, would be an injustice to Owen. For him, as for all the Puritans, sanctification was just one facet and cross-section of the more comprehensive reality that is central to Christian existence—namely, *communion with God*.

The thought of communion with God takes us to the very heart of Puritan theology and religion. This becomes clear as soon as we see how this subject stands related to other themes which stood in the forefront of Puritan interest.

We all know, for instance, that the Puritans were deeply concerned with the many-sided problem of man—man's nature and place in the world, man's powers and possibilities for good and evil, man's sufferings, hopes, fears, and frustrations, man's destiny, man in the 'fourfold state' of innocence, of sin, of grace, and of glory. And to their minds the whole end and purpose of man's existence was that he should have communion with God. 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.'⁴⁴

Again: we all know that the Puritans were deeply and constantly concerned with the doctrine of the covenant of grace—its nature, its terms, its promises, its blessings, the modes of its dispensation, its seals and ordinances. The covenant of grace has been called the characteristic Puritan doctrine, as justification by faith was the characteristic doctrine of Luther. And to the minds of the Puritans the direct end and purpose of the covenant of grace was to bring men into union and communion with God.

Or again: the Puritans never tired of dwelling on the mediation of Christ in the covenant of grace—his humiliation and exaltation, his satisfaction and intercession, and all his gracious relations as Shepherd, Husband, Friend, and the rest, to his own covenant people. And the Puritan view of the immediate end and purpose of the mediation of Christ is made plain to us by John Owen when he speaks of Christ's 'great undertaking, in his *life, death, resurrection, ascension*, being a mediator between God and us . . . to bring us to an enjoyment of God'.⁴⁵ This is the reality of communion.

Once more: Puritanism first emerged as a quest for the reform of England's public worship, and the substance, mode, and practice of corporate as well as individual worship remained a central Puritan concern throughout the movement's history. Of no one was this more true than of Owen himself, as his works bear witness: over and above his frequent treatments of worship in its various aspects as a distinct topic, he relates just about every theological theme to the worship of God somewhere in his writings. Why this sustained focus on worship? Not only because worship's primary aim is to give God the glory and praise that is his due, but also because worship's secondary end and purpose, inseparably bound up with the first, is to lead worshippers into the sunshine of communion with God—a true foretaste of heaven, in which all spiritual souls find their highest delight.

Thus, to the Puritans, communion between God and man is the end to which both creation and redemption are the means; it is the goal to which both theology and preaching must ever point; it is the essence of true religion; it is, indeed, the definition of Christianity.

⁴⁴ Westminster Shorter Catechism, answer to question 1.

⁴⁵ Owen, *Works*, II:78.

To this subject Owen devoted his treatise, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, each person distinctly, in love, grace and consolation; or, the Saint's Fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, unfolded*. This work, first published in 1657, was reprinted in 1674 with a prefatory epistle by Daniel Burgess, who called it 'the only [treatise] extant, upon its great and necessary subject'. This was true, however, only from a formal standpoint; the substance of what Owen says is found in less systematic form in very many Puritan expositions. One of the richest of these is Thomas Goodwin's *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*. (Goodwin, a fellow-Independent in church principles, was Owen's close colleague in the 1650s when Owen was Oxford's Vice-Chancellor and Goodwin was President of Magdalen College.) Other relevant sources for comparison would be Puritan expositions of the Song of Solomon (Sibbes, Collinges, Durham, and others), and of the favourite Puritan theme of 'walking with God' (for instance, Robert Bolton, *Some General Directions for a Comfortable Walking with God*, Richard Baxter's *The Divine Life*, and Thomas Gouge's *Christian Directions Shewing how to Walk with God All the Day Long*).

5

Owen's analysis of communion with God can be set out in five propositions.

1. *Communion with God is a relationship of mutual interchange between God and man*. Such is the idea which the New Testament word *koinonia* (translated in the English Bible as both 'fellowship' and 'communion') expresses. In general, *koinonia* denotes a joint participation in something by two or more parties, an active sharing in which the parties give to and receive from each other. 'Communion consists in *giving* and *receiving*.'⁴⁶ Such a relationship naturally implies the existence of some prior bond between the parties concerned. Accordingly, Owen defines *koinonia* between God and men as follows:

Our communion . . . with God consisteth in his *communication of himself unto us, with our returnal unto him* of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that *union* which in Jesus Christ we have with him . . . [a] mutual communication in giving and receiving, after a most holy and spiritual manner, which is between God and the saints, while they walk together in a covenant of peace, ratified by the blood of Jesus.⁴⁷

2. *Communion with God is a relationship in which the initiative and power are with God*. Note how Owen identifies the starting-point of communion with God as 'his communication of himself to us', with 'our returnal unto him of that which he requireth' coming in only on the basis of this. Communion with God is a relationship which God himself creates by giving himself to us; only so can we know him, and respond to him. In

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, II:22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, II:8f.

the narrow sense of our communing with God, communion is a Christian duty; in the broader and more fundamental sense of God's communicating himself to us, whether to prompt our communing or to reward it, communion is a divine gift. Thus conceived, the idea of communion with God is broader than in our common present-day usage. We tend always to think of communion with God subjectively and anthropocentrically; we limit it to our conscious experience of God, our deliberate approach to him and his felt dealings with us. But the Puritans thought of communion with God objectively and theocentrically, taking the idea to cover, first, God's approach to us in grace, pardoning, regenerating, and making us alive to himself; next, all his subsequent self-giving to us; and only then extending it to our own conscious seeking after, and tasting of, his gracious presence. They were not less concerned about experiential acquaintance with God than we are—rather, indeed, the reverse—but they did not isolate this concern in their minds from their broader theological concern about the doctrine of divine grace. Thus they were saved from the peril of false mysticism, which has polluted much would-be Christian devotion in recent times. The context and cause of our experienced communion with God, said the Puritans, is God's effective life-giving communion with us; the former is always to be thought of as a consequence and, indeed, an aspect of the latter. The idea of communion with God thus covers the whole of the grace-and-faith relationship with God in which we stand, a relationship which God himself initiates and in which at each stage the initiative remains in his hands. The Barthians of our day proclaim that God is the active subject in all human relationships with him as if this were a new discovery, but Puritans like Owen knew this long ago.

3. *Communion with God is a relationship in which Christians receive love from, and respond in love to, all three Persons of the Trinity.* Owen constantly insisted that the doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of Christian faith, and that if it falls, everything falls. The reason for this insistence was that the Christian salvation is a trinitarian salvation, in which the economic relations of the three divine Persons as they work out salvation together mirror their essential and eternal relations in the glorious life of the Godhead. The first Person, the Father, is revealed as the One who initiates, who chooses a people to save and his Son to save them, and who plans a way of salvation that is consistent with his holy character. The second Person is revealed as Son and Word in relation to the Father, imaging and embodying in himself the Father's nature and mind and coming forth from the Father to do his will by dying to redeem sinners. The third Person proceeds from the first two as their executive, conveying to God's chosen the salvation which the Son secured for them. All three are active in fulfilling a common purpose of love to unlovely men; all three give distinct gifts of their bounty to the chosen people, and all three, therefore, should be distinctly acknowledged in faith, with an appropriate response, by Christian believers. This is Owen's theme in his treatise *Of Communion*.

Consider first the Father, says Owen. His special gift to us may be described as an attitude and exercise of fatherly love: 'free, undeserved, and eternal . . . the Father peculiarly fixes upon the saints: this they are immediately to eye in him, to receive of him, and to make such returns thereof, as he is delighted withal.'⁴⁸ Owen points out that in the New Testament love is singled out as the special characteristic of the Father in his relation to us (1 Jn 4:8; 1 Cor 13:14; Jn 3:16; 14:27; Rom 5:5; Tit 2:4).

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, II:19.

The way to receive the Father's love is by faith; that is, in this case, by believing and acknowledging that Christ comes to us, not of his own initiative, but as the gift to us of a loving heavenly Father.

It is true, there is not an *immediate* acting of faith upon the Father, but by the Son. He is 'the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by' him (Jn 14:6). . . . But this is that I say: When by and through Christ, we have an access unto the Father, we then . . . see his love that he peculiarly bears unto us, and act faith thereon. We are then, I say, to eye it, to believe it, to receive it, as in him; the issues and fruits thereof being made out unto us through Christ alone. Though there be no light for us but in the beams, yet we may by the beams see the sun, which is the fountain of it. Though all our refreshments actually lie in the streams, yet by them we are led up to the *fountain*. Jesus Christ, in respect of the love of the Father, is but the beam, the stream, wherein though actually all our light, our refreshment lies, yet by him we are led to the fountain, the sun of eternal love itself. Would believers exercise themselves herein, they would find it a matter of no small spiritual improvement in their walking with God. . . . The soul being thus by faith through Christ . . . brought unto the bosom of God, into a comfortable persuasion, and spiritual perception and sense of his love, there reposes and rests itself. . . .⁴⁹

How should we respond to the Father's love? By love in return: that is, says Owen, 'by a peculiar delight and acquiescing in the Father, revealed effectually as love unto the soul.'⁵⁰ He goes on to analyse this love which we owe him as consisting of four elements—rest, delight, reverence, and obedience, in combination together.

Next, Owen says, consider the Son. His special gift to us is grace—communicated free favour, and all the spiritual benefits which flow from it. All grace is found in him, and is received by receiving him.

There is no man whatever that hath any want in reference unto the things of God, but Christ will be unto him that which he wants. . . . Is he *dead*? Christ is *life*. Is he *weak*? Christ is the *power* of God, and the *wisdom* of God. Hath he the *sense of guilt* upon him? Christ is complete *righteousness*. . . . Many poor creatures are sensible of their wants, but know not where their remedy lies. Indeed, whether it be life or light, power or joy, all is wrapped up in him.⁵¹

All this, says Owen, is in the mind of Paul when he speaks of 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ' (2 Cor 13:14), and of John when he says, 'of his fullness have we all received, and grace for grace' (Jn 1:16). In expounding the meaning of Christ's grace,

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, II:22f.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, II:24.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, II:52.

Owen makes much of the ‘conjugal relationship’ between Christ and his people, and offers a detailed christological exegesis of the Song of Songs, 2:1-7 and 5, at which we shall be looking shortly.

The way we receive Christ’s love is by faith; that is, in this case,

free, willing consent to receive, embrace and submit unto the Lord Jesus, as their husband, Lord and Saviour,—to abide with him, subject their souls unto him, and to be ruled by him for ever. . . . When the soul consents to take Christ on his own terms, to save him in his own way, and says, ‘Lord . . . am now willing to receive thee and to be saved in thy way,—merely by grace; and though I would have walked according to my own mind, yet now I wholly give myself to be ruled by the Spirit, for in thee have I righteousness and strength, in thee am I justified and do glory;’—then doth it carry on communion with Christ. . . . Let believers exercise their hearts abundantly unto this thing. This is choice communion with the Son Jesus Christ. Let us receive him in all his excellencies as he bestows himself upon us;—be frequent in thoughts of faith, comparing him with other beloveds, sin, world, legal righteousness; and preferring him before them, counting them all loss and dung in comparison of him . . . and we shall not fail in the issue of sweet refreshment with him.⁵²

How should we respond to the conjugal affection and loyalty of Christ towards us? By maintaining marital chastity towards him, says Owen: that is, by refusing to trust or hanker after any but him for our acceptance with God; by cherishing his Holy Spirit, sent to us for our eternal benefit; and by maintaining his worship undefiled, according to the Scripture pattern. This necessitates a daily deliberate submission to him as our gracious Lord. Daily we should rejoice before him in the knowledge of his perfection as a Saviour from sin; daily we should take the sins and infirmities of that day to his cross to receive forgiveness (‘this is every day’s work; I know not how any peace can be maintained with God without it’⁵³); daily we should look to Christ, and wait on him, for the supply of his Spirit to purify our hearts and work holiness in us. Holiness, according to the Puritans, cannot be attained without the exercise of faith, any more than it can be perfected without the effort of fighting sin. The saints, says Owen:

look upon him [Christ] as . . . the only *dispenser of the Spirit and of all grace* of sanctification and holiness . . . he is to *sprinkle* that blood upon their souls; he is to *create* the holiness in them that they long after. . . . In this state they look to Jesus; here faith fixes itself, in expectation of his giving out the Spirit for all these ends and purposes; mixing the promises with faith and so becoming actual partakers of all this grace. This is . . . their communion with Christ; this is the life of faith as to grace and holiness. Blessed is the soul that is exercised therein.⁵⁴

⁵² *Ibid*, II:58f.

⁵³ *Ibid*, II:194.

Finally, says Owen, consider the Spirit. He is called the Comforter, and comfort—strength and encouragement of heart, with assurance and joy—is his special gift to us. This comfort is conveyed in and through the understanding which he gives us of the love of God in Christ, and of our share in God’s salvation (Jn 14:26f; 16:14; Rom 5:15; 8:16). The Spirit’s ministry as our Comforter consists in

his bringing the promises of Christ to remembrance, glorifying him in our hearts, shedding abroad the love of God in us, witnessing with us, as to our spiritual state and condition, sealing us to the day of redemption; being the earnest of our inheritance, anointing us with . . . consolation, confirming our adoption, and being present with us in our supplications. Here is the wisdom of faith,—to find out, and meet with the Comforter in all these things; not to lose their sweetness, by lying in the dark [as] to their author, nor coming short of the returns which are required of us.⁵⁵

How are we to respond to the comforting work of the Spirit? By taking care not to grieve him by negligence or sin (Eph 4:30), nor to quench him by opposing or hindering his work (1 Thess 5:19), nor to resist him by refusing the word (Acts 7:51), but to give him constant thanks, and to pray to him for a continuance of his peace and goodness. (Owen finds in Revelation 1:4 a precedent for such prayer to the Spirit.)

This then, according to Owen, should be the pattern of our regular communion with the three Persons of the Godhead, in meditation, prayer, and a duly ordered life. We should dwell on the special mercy and ministry of each Person towards us, and make our proper response of love and submission distinctly to each. Thus we are to maintain a full-orbed communion with God.

Thomas Goodwin propounds a similar conception, with less concern for verbal precision but greater exuberance and warmth than we find in what James Moffatt once called ‘the dark grey pool of Owen’s ratiocination’. Owen has shown us intercourse with the Triune God as a part of Christian duty; in the following passage, Goodwin sets it before us as a part of God’s gift of assurance. Apropos of 1 John 1:3 and John 14:17-23, Goodwin writes:

There is communion and fellowship with all the persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and their love, severally and distinctly. . . . Christ putteth you upon labouring after a distinct knowing of, and communion with all three persons . . . rest not until all three persons manifest their love to thee . . . in assurance, sometimes a man’s communion and converse is with the one, sometimes with the other; sometimes with the Father, then with the Son, and then with the help of the Holy Ghost; sometimes his heart is drawn out to consider the Father’s love in choosing, and then the love of Christ in redeeming, and so the love of the Holy Ghost, that searcheth the deep

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, II:205f.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, II:249.

things of God, and revealeth them to us, and taketh all the pains with us; and so a man goes from one witness to another distinctly, which I say, is the communion that John would have us to have. . . . And this assurance it is not a knowledge by way of argumentation or deduction, whereby we infer that if one loveth me then the other loveth me, but it is intuitive, as I may so express it, and we should never be satisfied till we have attained it, and till all three persons lie level in us, and all make their abode with us, and we sit as it were in the midst of them, while they all manifest their love to us . . . this is the highest that ever Christ promised in this life (in his last sermon, John 14).⁵⁶

Owen did not express himself this way; but would he have assented to Goodwin's statements? I think he would.

4. *Communion with God is a relation of active, forward-looking friendship between God and man.* This thought brings into perspective at once the whole of John Owen's complex analysis. Communion with God means simply behaving as a friend of the God who has called you his friend. Thomas Goodwin dwells on the love of Christ, who, when we had fallen into sin and enmity against God, died to make us his friends again—though 'he could have created new ones cheaper'⁵⁷—and develops powerfully the thought that friendship is not a means to an end, but an end in itself, and that true friendship is expressed in the cultivation of our friend's company for its own sake:

Mutual communion is the soul of all true friendship and a familiar converse with a friend hath the greatest sweetness in it . . . [so] besides the common tribute of daily worship you owe to [God], take occasion to come into his presence on purpose to have communion with him. This is truly friendly, for friendship is most maintained and kept up by visits; and these, the more free and less occasioned by urgent business . . . they are, the more friendly they are. . . . We use to check our friends with this upbraiding, You still [always] come when you have some business, but when will you come to see me? . . . When thou comest into his presence, be telling him still how well thou lovest him; labour to abound in expressions of that kind, than which . . . there is nothing more taking with the heart of any friend. . . .⁵⁸

Once more, Owen's style appears cooler and less intimate; yet he makes identical points, in his own way. He dwells on Christ's delight in his saints, assuring us that 'his heart is glad in us, without sorrow. And every day whilst we live is his *wedding-day*'; also, that 'the thoughts of communion with the saints were the joy of his heart from eternity'.⁵⁹ 'He useth them as friends, as bosom friends in whom he is delighted,'⁶⁰ telling

⁵⁶ Thomas Goodwin, *Works*, VIII:376ff. Goodwin refers to John 14:21-33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, VII:193.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, VII:197ff.

⁵⁹ Owen, *Works*, II:118.

them all that in his heart that concerns them. Then, on the other side, ‘the saints delight in Christ: he is their joy, their crown, their rejoicing, their life, food, health, strength, desire, righteousness, salvation, blessedness’—and ‘in that pattern of communion with Jesus Christ which we have in the Canticles, this is abundantly insisted on.’⁶¹ Owen here aligns himself with those many Puritans who follow in the footsteps of Bernard and other medievals in expounding the Song of Solomon as a parable (they themselves were perhaps unwisely willing to say, allegory) of the mutual love of Christ and his spiritual bride, sometimes the church and sometimes the Christian. In the course of his analysis of communion with Christ Owen gives some of his own thumbnail exposition of parts of the Song, and I cannot do better than cite here some paragraphs from Sinclair Ferguson’s excellent summary of it.⁶²

The theme of Canticles is this, essentially:

The Christian’s sense of the love of Christ, and the effect of it in communion with him, by prayer and praises, is divinely set forth in the book of Canticles. The church therein is represented as the spouse of Christ; and, as a faithful spouse she is always either solicitous about his love, or rejoicing in it (II:46). . . .

The theme is worked out in this way:

Christ and the Christian are the two main characters. The *daughters of Jerusalem* represent ‘all sorts of professors’ (II:55). The *watchmen* represent office-bearers in the church, and the city represents the visible church itself. And while, occasionally, the corporate aspect of the Christian life appears in his exposition, the major concentration is on the individual’s experience and the communion he enjoys with his Lord Jesus.

Owen develops this theme in several central passages:

2:1-7: here Christ is seen, describing his own character and significance to the Christian. He is the Rose of Sharon, the Lily of the Valley. That is, he is pre-eminent in all his personal graces, just as the Rose abounds in perfume, and the Lily in beauty. Indeed, the Rose is from the fertile plain of Sharon, in which the choicest herds are reared.

What does all this mean? Christ ‘allures’ (II:42) the Christian, says Owen—there is an irresistible attraction to him; the believer enjoys the scent of him as the Rose . . . he is compared to the apple tree (2:3)—it provides fruit for food, and shade for protection. . . . Christ . . . provides shelter, ‘from wrath without, and . . . because of weariness within. . . .

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, II:119f.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, II:124f.

⁶² *The Banner of Truth* 194 (November 1979): pp 10-15. See also Sinclair Ferguson’s *John Owen on the Christian Life*, pp 79-86. This book is a thorough survey of its subject, ranging much wider than the present chapter.

From the power of *corruptions*, trouble of temptations, distress of persecutions, there is in him quiet, rest, and repose' (II:43-44).

And so in the verses that follow, our communion with the Lord Jesus is delineated for us. It is marked by four things:

(i) *Sweetness of fellowship*. 'He brought me to the banqueting-house', v. 4, where he reveals all the treasures of his grace in the Gospel. Indeed, says Owen, we find in this book (1:2) that his love is better than wine, since it is righteousness, peace, joy in the Holy Spirit. . . .

(ii) *Delight in fellowship*. The maiden is overcome with all this, and she wants to know more of the love of her beloved. She is 'sick of love'—v. 5, 'not (as some suppose) fainting for want of a sense of love,' but, 'made sick and faint, even overcome, with the mighty actings of that divine affection, after she had once tasted of the sweetness of Christ in the banqueting-house' (II:44).

(iii) *Safety* v. 4—his banner over her was love—a symbol of protection, and a token of success and victory. . . . Christ's banner stands over the believer. . . . Only what Christ gives to us in his love for us will ever come to us. It is the great argument of Romans 8:32—he that spared not his own Son, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? This is our resting place and safety!

(iv) *Support and Consolation* v. 6. His left hand is under her head, and his right hand embraces her. What is this? asks Owen. It is the picture of Christ supporting the church, and at the same time cherishing it and nourishing it! And so, v. 7—their fellowship together is continued and sustained.

In Canticles 2:9 Christ reappears. In the Song, the lover shows himself through the lattice, and this is interpreted as follows: 'Our sight of him here is as it were by glances,—liable to be clouded by many interpositions.' There is 'instability and imperfection in our apprehension of him', that is our present mortal state; 'In the meantime he looketh through the *windows* of the ordinances of the Gospel' (II:126). When the Christian has turned away in heart, Christ comes, searching and longing for the loving service of the church. If he does not receive it, he will withdraw. It would be impossible within the general framework of Owen's theology to suppose that this involves severed relationships; but it does imply disjointed experience and broken fellowship. Christ is still the Christian's possession and vice-versa, but the *sense* [awareness] of this has gone.

In chapter 3 the spouse discovers that her lover has withdrawn. She is perplexed. Owen is not clear whether this is the cause or the effect of the 'night' in which she discovers herself, but points to the application: 'in the greatest peace and opportunity of ease and rest, a believer finds none in the absence of Christ: though he be on his bed, having nothing to disquiet him, he rests not, if Christ, his rest, be not there' (II:128). So the soul searches for Christ, first of all in the ordinary duties of faith (II:613), but 'This is not a way to recover a sense of lost love' (II:353), rather there

must be ‘Resolutions for new, extraordinary, vigorous, constant applications unto God,’—‘the first general step and degree of a sin-entangled soul acting towards a recovery’ (*ibid*). It is evident that here the soul has lost its sense of forgiveness, and that the search for its restoration involves two things: first, a search of one’s own *soul* to discover the cause of Christ’s absence, and, second, a search of the *promises* of God to discover the means of his return. Self-examination must be followed by a reapplication to the Covenant of Grace. If this yields no success, the solution is to be found in extraordinary duties, as Owen has already hinted. So the spouse goes about the city (the visible church) looking for her lover. If Christ is not found in private, it is the Christian’s duty to make a special search for him in public, through worship, the preaching of the word, and the sacraments. In her search the maiden is found by the watchmen (office-bearers in the church visible) . . . take notice of the plight of the spouse. This is the duty of faithful office-bearers. Exactly how Christ is discovered is not indicated in the passage, but Owen detects some significance in this too. When Christ comes, it is in his own mysterious way by the Spirit.

By chapter 5 the spouse has sunk again into sloth and indolence. The shepherd-lover comes to meet with her, but she excuses herself by the unsuitableness of the time and her lack of preparation for her duties (II:520). Christ, thus rebuffed, leaves the believer and ‘long it is before she obtains any recovery’ (II:346). He returns later in the chapter and the description given in 5:10-16 provides Owen with a further opportunity to celebrate what the Christian finds in his Saviour who is described as being ‘white and ruddy’. ‘He is *white* in the glory of his *deity*, and *ruddy* in the preciousness of his *humanity*’ (II:49). . . . It is this excellence, through the union of the ‘white and ruddy’ that fits him to be the Saviour, and brings salvation through union and communion with him.

In the following verses the maiden goes on to describe Christ more fully. His *head* is as fine gold—conveying the splendour and durability of Christ as the head of the government of the kingdom of God (II:71). His *locks* are said to be ‘bushy’ or curled, ‘black as a raven’. To first appearance the hair is tangled, but in fact it is well and precisely ordered, thus representing the wisdom of Christ in his mediatorial administration. The hair is black to indicate that he ways are past finding out (II:72), and, in a natural sense, emphasising his comeliness and vigour (II:73). His *eyes* are like those of the dove—not a bird of prey—indicating the wealth of his knowledge and discernment. They are tender and pure as he discerns the thoughts and intentions of men (*ibid*). His *cheeks* are like beds of spices, sweet of savour, beautiful in their orderliness (II:75); so the graces of Christ, in his human nature, are gathered by Christians in prayer, from the Covenant promises of God which are well ordered (2 Samuel 23:5). These graces are eminent indeed, like ‘towers of perfumes’ (marginal reading adopted by Owen, II:76). His *lips* are like lilies, dropping myrrh—a description of the riches of Christ’s word (*ibid*).

His *hands* (v. 14), refers to the work he has accomplished, as the fruit of his love. His *belly* (in the sense of bowels) reminds us of his tender mercy and loving affection. His *legs*, *countenance* and *mouth* (v. 15) remind us of the stability of his kingdom, the grace and faithfulness of his promises. He is completely worthy of the desires and affections of his followers (v. 16) in his birth, life, and death, in the glory of his ascension and coronation, in the supply of the Spirit of God, in the ordinances of worship, in the tenderness of his care, in the justice of his vengeance on his enemies, as well as in the pardon he dispenses to all his own people. And this Christ, says Owen, often comes by surprise to the Christian: when he is engaged in ordinary occupations, he finds his mind drawn out in love for Jesus. Weigh these experiences against those when Satan invades the mind with worldly thoughts, says Owen, lest you be led to despair.

Owen adds much more of the same kind, but we cannot follow him further in it now.

It is, as Ferguson says, of secondary importance how far we go along with Owen's allegorising here. What matters is the clear evidence which it affords that at the heart both of his understanding of true Christian piety and of his own personal commitment lay loving fellowship with the living Lord Jesus: fellowship which gave shape, substance and strength both to Owen's laborious discipleship through troubled times and to his personal hope.

In the love affair that is Christianity, the links between faith, love and hope are strong and obvious. On the one hand, God's promises in the covenant of grace guarantee us not only immunity from past sins and protection under present pressures, but also the felicity of closer and richer fellowship in the future, when faith is superseded by sight. On the other hand, as earthly lovers long to be together, with all five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell) actively involved with the active mind in joyfully apprehending each other, so it is, naturally and spontaneously, with the saints in relation to their Saviour. Writes Owen:

To have the eternal glory of God in Christ, with all the fruits of his wisdom and love while we ourselves are under the full participation of the effects of them, immediately, directly revealed, proposed, made known unto us, in a divine and glorious light, our souls being furnished with a capacity to behold and perfectly comprehend them,—this is the heaven which, according to God's promise, we look for.⁶³

Sustained by such a hope, the believer can and should face the last enemy squarely and get ready to take death in stride when it comes; and such preparation of heart and mind for passage out of this world into the immediate presence of God was, in fact, a major theme of all Puritan spirituality.

⁶³ Owen, *Works*, VII:338f.

How Owen had prepared himself appears from his deathbed reply on the morning of 24 August 1683 to the news which a fellow minister, William Payne, had brought him that his last work, entitled appropriately enough *Meditations and Discourses of the Glory of Christ*, was now in the press. ‘I am glad to hear it,’ said Owen, ‘but O brother Payne! The long wished for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done, or was capable of doing, in this world.’⁶⁴ He knew that he was dying, and before the day ended he was gone. Right to the end Owen’s lumbering Latinised linguistic precision stayed with him, so that what was almost his last utterance was phrased like a public address, and that was, to say the least, quaint—but I ask you, leaving the stylistic question aside, was there ever a lovelier or sweeter or indeed nobler exit line?

5. *Communion with God in Christ is enjoyed in a special way at the Lord’s Table.* The typical Puritan view of the Lord’s Supper was not a bare memorialism, as if eucharistic worship was a matter merely of recalling Christ’s death without fellowshiping with him in the process. It was, to be sure, no part of the Puritan belief that the communicant receives in the Supper a unique grace which he could not otherwise have; the Puritans would all agree with the Scot, Robert Bruce, that ‘we get no other thing in the Sacrament, than we get in the Word’.⁶⁵ But there is a special exercise of faith proper to the Lord’s Table, where Christ’s supreme act of love is set before us with unique vividness in the sacramental sign; and from this should spring a specially close communion with the Father and the Son. Let Richard Baxter introduce this teaching:

Also in the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, we are called to a familiar converse with God. He there appeareth to us by a wonderful condescension in the representing, communicating signs of the flesh and blood of his Son, in which he hath most conspicuously revealed his love and goodness to believers: there Christ himself with his covenant gifts are all delivered to us by these investing signs of his own institution. . . . No where is God so near to man as in Jesus Christ; and no where is Christ so familiarly represented to us, as in his holy sacrament. Here we are called to sit with him at his table, as his invited, welcome guests; to commemorate his sacrifice, to feed upon his very flesh and blood; that is, with our mouths upon his representative flesh and blood, by such a feeding as belongs to faith. The marriage covenant betwixt God incarnate and his espoused ones, is there publicly sealed, celebrated and solemnized. There we are entertained by God as friends . . . and that at the most precious costly feast. If ever a believer may on earth expect his kindest entertainment, and near access, and a humble intimacy with his Lord, it is in the participation of this sacrifice feast, which is called The Communion, because it is appointed as well for our special communion with Christ as

⁶⁴ Cited from Ferguson, *op cit*, p 18. Owen’s last letter, dictated the day before, had said: ‘I am going to him whom my soul hath loved, or rather who hath loved me with an everlasting love; which is the whole ground of all my consolation’ (*loc cit*).

⁶⁵ Robert Bruce, *Sermons on the Sacrament*, ed T.F. Torrance (James Clarke: London, 1958), p 64.

with one another. It is here that we have the fullest intimation, expression, and communication of the wondrous love of God; and therefore it is here that we have the loudest call, and best assistance, to make a large return of love; and where there is most of this love between God and man, there is most communion, and most of heaven, that can be had on earth.⁶⁶

Owen and Baxter did not see eye to eye on everything—on the nature of the atonement, the ground of justification, and a number of church questions, they were in fact a fair distance apart—but in regarding the Lord’s Supper as an occasion and means of communion with Christ they were truly at one. Owen never wrote about the Lord’s Supper, but from a series of informal sacramental sermons that were taken down in shorthand as he preached⁶⁷ his view of the matter becomes plain. The last sentence of the last sermon expresses his basic position: ‘We say, we have in these things *experience of a peculiar communion* with Christ, in a way made proper to this ordinance, which is not to be found in any other ordinance.’⁶⁸ Once again, Sinclair Ferguson offers an admirable summary of Owen’s development of his theme, which we may quote:⁶⁹

The communion of the Supper is *commemorative* since it involves a profession and proclamation of Christ’s death. It is *eucharistical*, and *federal* (IX:527) in that God *confirms* his covenant . . . and believers renew themselves in covenant obligations.

But how is Christ present in the Supper? Owen believes he is present ‘in an special manner’ (IX:572) . . . his presence is not corporeal. . . Christ is present by representation, exhibition and obsignation.

Representation is a favourite expression (IX:563, 593, 595, 605, 606). Christ is shown as the one who suffered for men’s sins and as ‘newly sacrificed’ (IX:564, cf III:440) is food for their souls. This representation is seen with respect to God’s setting him forth; his passion; his exhibition in the promise; his incorporation with the believer in union; and his [the believer’s] participation with Christ by faith (IX:540-41).

Christ is also *exhibited* in the Supper. Here the important thing for Owen is that *it is Christ who exhibits himself*. He is not proposed as the object of faith by the Father or the Spirit, but by himself (IX:589). This makes the Supper a ‘peculiar’ ordinance as Christ sets himself forth as Prophet, Priest and King (IX:621-22). ‘It is himself, as accompanied with all the benefits of that great part of his mediation, in dying for us’ (IX:590).

⁶⁶ Richard Baxter, *Works*, III:816.

⁶⁷ Owen, *Works*, IX:517-622.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, IX:622.

⁶⁹ Ferguson, *op cit*, pp 221-224.

Christ is also present by *obsignation*: the covenant has been made and confirmed by the blood of Christ; ‘he comes and seals the covenant with his own blood in the administration of this ordinance’ (IX:574).

Communion with Christ then becomes a matter of acknowledging his presence in the power of his reconciling sacrifice and of observing the ordinance with reverent confidence that in it Christ comes to pledge his saving love to each one personally, so that ‘we sit down at God’s table as those that are the Lord’s friends . . . there being now no difference [contention] between him and us’.⁷⁰ We should prepare ourselves for the occasion by ‘*Meditation* on the guilt of sin, the holiness of God, and salvation in Christ (IX:559); *Self-examination* in a spirit of repentance . . . and faith . . . *Supplication*, in which prayer is added “which may inlay and digest all the rest in the soul” (IX:562); and *expectation* that God will keep his promise, and “meet us according to the desire of our hearts” (*ibid.*).’⁷¹ Then we may confidently expect an enlivening encounter with our beloved Lord, resulting in more joy, peace, grateful love, and humble devotion, than was ours before; for it is not Christ’s way to disappoint those who seek him by a proper use of the means of grace.

6

This completes our mapping of the structure of spirituality, theological and experiential, that was taught by the magisterial instructor who has always been regarded as the prince of the Puritans. At every point he speaks for the entire school of Puritan pastoral theologians, differing from others only in the weight and wisdom with which he formulates their common certainties. So the general reflections that are now in order will have in view, not just Owen, as if he stood alone, but the whole heritage of which he was so distinguished a mouthpiece.

Anyone who knows anything at all about Puritan Christianity knows that at its best it had a vigour, a manliness, and a depth which modern evangelical piety largely lacks. This is because Puritanism was essentially an experimental faith, a religion of ‘heart-work’, a sustained practice of seeking the face of God, in a way that our own Christianity too often is not. The Puritans were manlier Christians just because they were godlier Christians. It is worth noting three particular points of contrast between them and ourselves.

First, we cannot but conclude that whereas to the Puritans communion with God was a *great* thing, to evangelicals today it is a comparatively *small* thing. The Puritans were concerned about communion with God in a way that we are not. The measure of our unconcern is the little that we say about it. When Christians meet, they talk to each other about their Christian work and Christian interests, their Christian acquaintances, the state of the churches, and the problems of theology—but rarely of their daily experience of

⁷⁰ Owen, *Works*, IX:566.

⁷¹ Ferguson, *op cit*, p 224.

God. Modern Christian books and magazines contain much about Christian doctrine, Christian standards, problems of Christian conduct, techniques of Christian service—but little about the inner realities of fellowship with God. Our sermons contain much sound doctrine—but little relating to the converse between the soul and the Saviour. We do not spend much time, alone or together, in dwelling on the wonder of the fact that God and sinners have communion at all; no, we just take that for granted, and give our minds to other matters. Thus we make it plain that communion with God is a small thing to us. But how different were the Puritans! The whole aim of their ‘practical and experimental’ preaching and writing was to explore the reaches of the doctrine and practice of man’s communion with God. In private they talked freely of their experiences of God, for they had deep experiences to talk about, like the ‘three or four poor women sitting at a door in the sun’ whom Bunyan met at Bedford:

Their talk was about a new birth, the work of God on their hearts, also how they were convinced of their miserable state by nature; they talked how God had visited their souls with his love in the Lord Jesus, and with what words and promises they had been refreshed, comforted, and supported against the temptations of the devil. Moreover, they reasoned of the suggestions and temptations of Satan in particular; and told each other by which they had been afflicted, and how they were borne up under his assaults. . . . And methought they spake as if joy did make them speak. . .

⁷²

And the Puritans never ceased to feel a sense of awe and wonder that access to God in peace and friendship was possible for them at all. ‘Truly for sinners to have fellowship with God, the infinitely holy God, is an astonishing dispensation,’ wrote Owen,⁷³ and Puritan hearts thrilled again and again at the wonder of God’s ‘astonishing’ grace. To them it was the most marvellous thing in the world. Yet we in our day, much as we love to sing ‘Amazing Grace’ (I suppose, because we like the tune), are not inwardly amazed by grace as the Puritans were; it does not startle us that the holy Creator should receive sinners into his company; rather, we take it for granted! ‘God will forgive; that’s his *job*’ was the final scoff with which the French cynic went to meet his Maker. ‘God will receive; that his *job*’ seems to be our bland assumption today. Surely something is wrong here.

Then, second, we observe that whereas 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. Our interest focuses on religious experience, as such, and on man’s quest for God, whereas the Puritans were concerned with the God of whom men have experience, and in the manner of his dealings with those whom he draws to himself. The difference of

⁷² John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed Roger Sharrock (Oxford University Press: London, 1966), p 16. It is worth noting that Owen admired Bunyan’s preaching, and arranged for his own publisher to print the first edition of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*: see Ferguson, *op cit*, pp 3,16; Toon, *op cit*, pp 161ff.

⁷³ Owen, *Works*, II:7.

interest comes out clearly when we compare Puritan spiritual autobiography—*Grace Abounding*, say, or Baxter’s autobiography, or the memoirs of Fraser of Brea—with similar works our own day.⁷⁴ In modern spiritual autobiography, the hero and chief actor is usually the writer himself; he is the centre of interest, and God comes in only as a part of his story. His theme is in effect ‘I—and God’. But in Puritan autobiography, God is at the centre throughout. He, not the writer, is the focus of interest; the subject of the book is in effect ‘God—and me’. The pervasive God-centredness of Puritan accounts of spiritual experience is a proof of their authenticity, and a source of their power to present God to the modern reader. But when experience of God is told in a dramatised and self-glorifying way, it is a sure sign that the experience itself, however poignant, lacked depth, if, indeed, it was genuine at all.

Third, it seems undeniable that the Puritans’ passion for spiritual integrity and moral honesty before God, their fear of hypocrisy in themselves as well as in others, and the humble self-distrust that led them constantly to check whether they had not lapsed into religious play-acting before men with hearts that had gone cold towards God, *has no counterpart in the modern-day evangelical ethos*. They were characteristically cautious, serious, realistic, steady, patient, persistent in well-doing and avid for holiness of heart; we, by contrast, too often show ourselves to be characteristically brash, euphoric, frivolous, superficial, naive, hollow and shallow. Owen’s advice to ‘my fellow-labourers and students in divinity’ about the way to approach the task of upholding the faith against falsehood and folly climaxes with a call to ‘diligent endeavour to have the power of the truths professed and contended for abiding upon our hearts’;⁷⁵ surely in saying this Owen plots the path from where we are to where the Puritans were, and where we should be, and need to be, in the quality of our own walk with God. The whole passage calls for quotation.

When the heart is cast indeed into the mould of the doctrine that the mind embraceth; . . . not the sense of the words only is in our heads, but the sense of the things abides in our hearts; when we have communion with God in the doctrine we contend for,—then shall we be garrisoned, by the grace of God, against all the assaults of men. And without this all our contending is, as to ourselves, of no value. What am I the better if I can dispute that Christ is God, but have no sense of sweetness in my heart from hence that he is a God in covenant with my soul? What will it avail me to evince, by testimonies and arguments, that he hath made satisfaction for sin, if, through my unbelief, the wrath of God abideth on me, and I have no experience of my own being made the righteousness of God in him? . . . it be any advantage to me, in the issue, to profess and dispute that God worketh the conversion of a sinner by the irresistible grace of his Spirit, if I was never acquainted experimentally with the deadness and utter impotency to good, that opposition to the law of God, which is in my own soul by nature, [and] with the efficacy of the exceeding greatness of

⁷⁴ On Puritan spiritual autobiography, see Owen Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1972; Schocken Books: New York, 1972).

⁷⁵ Owen, *Works*, XII:52.

the power of God in quickening, enlightening, and bringing forth the fruits of obedience in me? . . . us, then, not think that we are any thing the better for our conviction of the truths of the great doctrines of the gospel . . . we find the power of the truths abiding in our own hearts and have a continual experience of their necessity and excellency in our standing before God and our communion with him.⁷⁶

A word to the wise? There was once a day when God sent Jeremiah to say to Israel, ‘Ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls’ (Jer 6:16). As we study Owen on the spiritual life, may it be that God is speaking in similar terms to us? Owen’s instructions and directions are indeed ‘old paths’, as old as the Bible, but they are paths which the Puritans as a body found to be in truth ‘the good way’. We shall do well to seek for grace to start walking in them ourselves. ‘And you will find rest for your souls.’

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⁷⁶ *Loc cit.*