

John Owen on Communication from God

by J. I. Packer

1

Who was John Owen? His name has appeared in this book already (and will do so many times more), and he will be properly profiled in Chapter Twelve. Here I need only say that he is by common consent not the most versatile, but the greatest among Puritan theologians. For solidity, profundity, massiveness and majesty in exhibiting from Scripture God's ways with sinful mankind there is no one to touch him. On every topic he handles, apart from the limits he imposes on synods and magistrates, he stands in the centre of the Puritan mainstream, totally in line with the Westminster standards and the developed ideal of godliness. All my chapters on Owen give evidence for this assertion, as will appear. In his own day he was seen as England's foremost bastion and champion of Reformed evangelical orthodoxy, and he did not doubt that God had given him this role; but his interest lay in broadening and deepening insight into the realities that orthodoxy confesses, and a humbled and humbling awareness that his present understanding, though true (so he believed) as far as it went, was deeply inadequate to those realities pervades all that he wrote. In this, as in most things, he was more like John Calvin than was any other of the Puritan leaders.

2

If my present chapter title were construed according to the Owenian idiom, it would license me to range over the whole field of the Holy Spirit's work in applying redemption: for John Owen used the word 'communication' to cover every divine bestowal of benefit upon man. But I am using the word in its modern restricted sense, and what I propose to explore is John Owen's account of *cognitive* communication from God to men—in other words, his doctrine of the Spirit and the word, his answer to the question, how does God bring us to understand him, and to comprehend the world of spiritual reality?

The giving of spiritual understanding is not, of course, an end in itself; as Owen recognises, it is always to be seen and valued as a means to something further—knowing and enjoying God. But it is a subject in itself, which can be clearly delimited in terms of the concept of communication from the mind of God to the minds of men. It was, in fact, in these terms that Owen saw and discussed it, rather than in terms of the formal categories of revelation, inspiration, illumination, and interpretation, which were, and are, the common topical divisions in textbooks of theology. Owen makes use of these

categories, of course, but the object of his interest is the communicative action of God as a whole, and what is striking about his presentation of it is the organic way in which, Calvin-like, he holds these themes together in the broad and dynamic context which the thought of God making his mind known to sinners provides.

Owen does not, to my knowledge, anywhere make the point that the image of God in which man was created involves the capacity for receiving, and responding to, communications from the Creator. This, however, is constantly presupposed in his insistence, on the one hand, that the image of God in Adam was a state of actual responsive conformity to God's revealed will, and, on the other hand, that God gives us knowledge of his mind by calling our minds into play. God will instruct us in his mind and will, Owen maintains, in and by the rational faculties of our souls.¹ With all the Reformed theologians of his day, and certainly with the Bible, Owen assumes a direct affinity and correspondence between God's mind and man's, such that God can speak to us in words and we, within the limits of his own self-disclosure, can comprehend him in our thoughts. Not, indeed, that we can in any sense take his measure—God measures man, but not vice versa. We cannot plumb the mystery of his being (he is in that sense wholly incomprehensible to us), and there are many 'secret things' (Deut 29:29) in his plan which he has not told us; moreover, we can be quite sure that, whatever stage in our pilgrimage we may have reached, many of the things that he has told us we have not yet understood. Nevertheless, as far as our thoughts about him correspond to what he says about himself, they are true thoughts about him, and constitute real knowledge about him, knowledge which is fundamental to our actual dealing with him. In this sense Owen, like Calvin, appears as a Christian rationalist, who would have condemned out of hand the irrationalism of the neo-orthodox idea of a 'knowledge' of God derived from non-communicative 'encounters' with him. Basic to our knowledge of God, Owen would have said, is our knowledge about him, and this knowledge he himself gives us by his own verbal self-testimony.

However, Owen, like all mainstream Reformed thinkers, sees a problem here. Sin within us, the anti-God drive in mankind's makeup that is our legacy from Adam, has noetic well as behavioral consequences: it promises a universal unresponsiveness to spiritual truth and reality that the New Testament calls *hardness* and *blindness* of heart. More rational instruction thus proves ineffective; only the illumination of the Holy Spirit, opening our heart to God's word and God's word to our hearts, can bring understanding of, conviction about, and consent to, the things that God declares. No Puritan has a sharper sense than Owen of the tragic darkness and perversity of the fallen human mind, and therefore of the absolute necessity that the Spirit should work in preacher and teacher, hearer and student alike, if effective communication of divine things is ever to take place.

It is convenient to analyse Owen's concept of divine communication under five headings: (1) the giving of revelation; (2) the inspiring of Scripture; (3) the authenticating of Scripture; (4) the establishing of faith in Scripture; (5) the interpreting of Scripture. Each of these headings covers what Owen saw as one distinct element in the complex of activities whereby the Holy Spirit introduces the thoughts that are in God's mind into ours.

The source-documents are chiefly three. The first, published in 1658, is entitled *Of the Divine Originall, Authority, Self-evidencing Light and Power of the Scriptures*,

with an Answer to that Enquiry, How we know the Scriptures to be the Word of God. The second and third belong to the series of treatises, of which *Pneumatologia: A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* (1674) was the first, in which Owen works his way systematically through all the biblical material concerning the third Person of the Trinity. The two treatises which concern us, the second and third of Owen's series as well as of our sources, are *The Reason of Faith: or an Answer to the Enquiry, Wherefore we believe the Scripture to be the Word of God; with the causes and nature of that Faith wherewith we do so* (1677), and *Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as revealed in His Word, with assurance therein: and a Declaration of the Perspicuity of the Scriptures, with the external means of the Interpretation of them* (1678).¹ All these works hit out on occasion at illuminists and rationalistic theologians, but principally they have an anti-Roman polemical slant; Owen is writing to overthrow the Roman contentions, first, that faith in Scripture as God's word should be based on the church's traditional authentication of it, and, second, that the ordinary Christian should not attempt to interpret the Bible for himself, but should leave that to the institutional church to do for him. Owen's aim is to show that it belongs to the revealed and promised office of the Holy Spirit both to bring God's people to faith in Scripture as divine, and also to lead them into an understanding of Scripture as the law of life and the message of salvation. Since, however, his method of making his points in these treatises, as always, is expository, by means of appeals to texts, and since the treatises themselves are constructive and edificatory in their main purpose, and the polemical note is largely muted (as is common with Owen, though very uncommon in his age), it is easy to read them without thinking of their controversial purpose at all. Note, I did not say that it was easy to read them!—that would not be true; yet I do venture to say that the labour involved in plodding through these ill-arranged and tediously-written treatises will be found abundantly worthwhile.

For there is no question as to the importance for our day of the themes with which Owen deals. The doctrine of revelation is in the melting-pot; the historic evangelical belief in verbal communication from God through the Bible is at a discount; can Owen, the greatest British divine of his day, if not of all time, help us to recover and re-establish the truth? Or is he himself vulnerable to criticism? One feature of the contemporary theological scene is the polemic of Karl Barth and some of his followers against the expositors of Reformed orthodoxy in the seventeenth century for having, as they allege, foreshortened their doctrine of divine communication by 'freezing' the Spirit in the Scriptures. Barth's complaint is that, having started well by asserting the divine origin of Scripture, these theologians allowed rationalism to creep into their biblical exposition and theology, for want of effectively thinking through the doctrine of the Spirit as Lord of, and instructor through, the written word. Since Barth's own doctrine of Scripture makes its divine origin wholly problematical, and his theological interpretations of it seem again and again to be read into the text rather than read out of it, one is tempted simply to retort 'physician, heal thyself', and leave the matter there—but the criticism is a serious one, made in good faith, and if it is valid as a stricture on Owen, who, whatever else he is, is certainly a mainstream Reformed divine, it would certainly limit the extent to which we could look to him for help today. But is it valid? It will be interesting, as we proceed, to see. In fact, we shall find that the criticism, as applied to Owen, is wholly invalid, and

¹ *Works*, IV:4ff; 118ff; XVI:281ff.

that the point at which Barth regards Owen's generation as deficient is actually the point of Owen's greatest mastery.

3

We move, then, to the first of our sub-divisions: *the giving of revelations*. Owen normally used the word 'revelation' to denote any immediate informative communication from God, disclosing things which could not otherwise have been known. Such communications, he tells us, were conveyed to their recipients by means of a voice or inward impression, accompanied on occasion by a dream or a vision. Owen lumps all revelations of this kind under the head of *prophecy*, defining a 'prophet' as 'one who used to receive divine revelations'.² He affirms that the patriarchs, from Adam onward, who received revelations from God, were 'guided by a prophetic spirit', and may properly be called prophets, as indeed Abraham is in Genesis 20:7.

The giving of these disclosures was the work of the Holy Spirit, who is 'the immediate author of all divine revelations',³ and it is clear from the narratives that they brought with them assurance of their own divine origin. They evidenced themselves to their recipients as being messages from God, and therefore as requiring absolute adherence and obedience, however inexplicable their content might appear to be—as, for instance, when Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac. (The nature of this self-evidencing quality will be analysed in a later section.) Adam, Abraham, Moses, and all the others to whom the word of God came did not need to ask what was the source of the message; they knew—that is, they found themselves sure and unable to doubt—that it was from God, and acted accordingly. Thus by faith they obtained their good report.

The revelations given to the prophets were in most cases not primarily for themselves, but for others, to whom they were charged to relay them. Owen knew that the prophets were, in the modern phrase, forthtellers as well as foretellers—as he himself says, 'prophets are the interpreters, the declarers of the word, mind, will, or oracles of God unto others'.⁴ In the providence of God, such of these revelations as 'are of general use to the Church'⁵ were written down, and thus the Old Testament Scriptures began to grow till they reached their present size. A similar process produced the New Testament: the Spirit enabled the apostles 'infallibly to receive, understand, and declare, the whole counsel of God in Christ',⁶ and then to write what they knew for the instruction of later ages. In an anti-Roman passage, Owen sharpens the point that a written record, as distinct from mere oral tradition, is always necessary if God's revelations are to be preserved from corruption and loss:

² *Ibid*, III:128.

³ *Ibid*, III:197.

⁴ *Ibid*, III:130.

⁵ *Ibid*, IV:11.

⁶ *Ibid*, III:197; from an exposition of John 16:13-15.

Before the committing of the Scriptures to writing, God had given the world an experiment, what keepers men were of this revelation by tradition; within some hundreds of years after the flood, all knowledge of Him, through the craft of Satan, and the vanity of the minds of men, which is unspeakable, was so lost, that nothing, but as it were the creation of a new world, or the erection of a new church-state by new revelations, could relieve it. After that great trial what can be farther pretended on the behalf of tradition I know not.⁷

Once the Scriptures were written, and the prophetic and apostolic witness to Christ was complete, no need remained for private revelations of new truths, and Owen did not believe that any were given. He opposed the ‘enthusiasm’ of those who, like the Quakers, put their trust in supposed revelations given apart from, and going beyond, the word. In a Latin work Owen calls the Quakers *fanatici*, ‘fanatics’, for their attitude. He is quick to deploy against them the old dilemma that if their ‘private revelations’ agree with Scripture, they are needless, and if they disagree, they are false.

In all this, Owen is following the beaten track of Reformed exposition, from Calvin onward, and there is nothing novel in any of the points that he makes.

So we proceed to our second topic: *the inspiring of Scripture*. Here again, the line that Owen follows is the standard Reformed teaching of his day. ‘Inspiration’ he defines as the inbreathing of the Holy Spirit, whereby revelations are given, received, and transmitted, both orally and in writing. The human subjects of inspiration, says Owen, are passive during the process, in the sense of being non-originate: though their minds are active in a psychological sense, they are being acted upon, or simply, as Owen says, ‘acted’, by the Spirit, ‘moved [borne along] by the Holy Ghost’ (2 Pet 1:21). We may quote here some statements from Owen’s own exposition of this text. The Spirit, says Owen,

prepared them [the prophets] for to receive the impressions he made upon them, and confirmed their memories to retain them. He did not indeed so enlighten and raise their minds as to give them a distinct understanding and full comprehension of all the things themselves that were declared unto them. There was more in their inspirations than they could search into the bottom of [Owen is thinking of the statement in 1 Pet 1:10, 11 that the prophets themselves did not know the full meaning of their own words about Christ]. But he so raised and prepared their minds, as that they might be capable to receive and retain those impressions of things which he communicated unto them. As a man tunes the strings of an instrument, that it may in a due manner receive the impressions of his finger, and give out the sounds he intends . . . he himself acted their faculties, making use of them to express his words, not their own conception.⁸

⁷ *Ibid*, XVI:334.

⁸ *Ibid*, III:132f.

With this may be compared Owen's account of the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring the writers of Scripture:

There were, therefore, three things concurring in this work. 1. The inspiration of the minds of these prophets, with the knowledge and apprehension of the things communicated unto them. 2. The suggestion of words unto them, to express what their minds conceived. 3. The guidance of their hands, in setting down the words suggested; or of their tongues, in uttering them unto those by whom they were committed to writing; as Baruch wrote the prophecy of Jeremiah from his mouth (Jer 36:3, 8). If either of these were wanting, the Scripture could not be absolutely and every way divine and infallible.

This completeness of divine initiative and control did not mean, however, that the human personalities or characteristics of the writers were obliterated.

The Holy Ghost in His work on the minds of men doth not put a force upon them, nor acts them any otherwise than they are in their own natures, and with their present endowments and qualifications meet to be used and acted . . . the words therefore which he suggests unto them are such as they are accustomed unto, and he causeth them to make use of such expressions as were familiar unto themselves. . . . We may also grant and do, that they used their own abilities of mind and understanding in the choice of words and expressions. So the preacher sought to find out acceptable words (Eccles 12:10). But the Holy Spirit who is more intimate unto the minds and skills of men than they are themselves, did so guide, act, and operate in them, as that the words they fixed upon were as directly and certainly from him, as if they had been spoken to them by an audible voice.⁹

The works of the biblical writers, therefore, have God for their ultimate author.

The laws they made known, the doctrines they delivered, the instructions they gave, the stories they recorded, the promises of Christ, the promises of gospel times they gave out and revealed, were not their own, not conceived in their minds, not formed by their reasonings, not retained in their memories from what they heard, not by any means beforehand comprehended by them (1 Pet 1:10, 11), but were all of them immediately from God; there being only a passive concurrence of their rational faculties in their reception.¹⁰

The inspiration of Scripture is thus both substantial and verbal: not only the matter, but also the words, are directly from God. 'As to the doctrine contained in it

⁹ *Ibid*, III:144f.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, XVI:298.

[Scripture], and the words wherein that doctrine is delivered, it is wholly his [God's]; what that speaks, he speaks himself. He speaks in it and by it.'¹¹ It is in this sense, and on this account, that we should receive the Bible as the word of God, 'the supernatural, immediate revelation of his mind unto us'.¹²

As the word of God, Holy Scripture is a direct and primary object of faith, just as the revelations which came to the patriarchs, and the inspired sermons of the prophets and apostles, were direct and primary objects of faith for their original recipients. All faith, says Owen, has the nature of assent on testimony, and Christian faith, which blossoms in consent to God's covenant, trust in his promises, and affiance in his Son, has as its root assent to evangelical truth on the testimony of God. It is thus not 'human', but 'divine'. 'Human' faith in anything is assent on human testimony; 'divine' faith is assent on divine testimony. Human faith in the articles of the Christian creed, and even in the evangelical presentation of Christ—assent, that is, based only on some form of human attestation, that of the church, for instance, or of particular scholars or saints, or on a rational probability-judgement—is not enough. Not only is such 'faith' necessarily unstable, it is not what God wants. The faith which he requires is divine faith springing from a recognition that the basis on which the Christian confession rests—that is, the testimony of Scripture—is God's own infallible testimony to himself. The ground of divine faith in the divine truth of what the Scriptures teach is thus the fact of their 'divine original', which is the source of their authority (that is, as Owen defines it, their 'power to command and require obedience, in the name of God'¹³). The Scriptures carry God's authority because, quite simply, he wrote them: they are his utterance, his own written word.

When Owen refers to the 'divine original' of the Scriptures, he means, not only that God *spoke* their contents long ago, when he caused them to be written, but also that he *speaks* the same content now: the Scriptures remain his contemporary utterance to every generation. So faith that is 'divine, supernatural, infallible', to quote a recurring trio of adjectives—true Christian faith, that is, as distinct from attitudes of conventional acquiescence that are less than divine faith—rests on the recognition that what Scripture says, God says, here and now, in direct application to all to whom the Scriptures come. Rational arguments based on facts relating to the Bible—its antiquity, its preservation, its inner unity of message and design, its historic attestation in the church, and its transforming effects wherever it goes—may serve to remove doubts that bother believers, and to bring unbelievers, however reluctantly, to 'a firm opinion, judgment, and persuasion'—a conviction, that is, that it is probable, indeed certain—'that the Scriptures are from God',¹⁴ yet this is at best only human faith, and is not therefore adequate. God requires divine faith in the truth and authority of his written word, and this comes only by recognising that it comes to us as the prophetic oracles came, under the rubric 'thus saith the Lord'.

¹¹ *Ibid*, XVI:306.

¹² *Ibid*, IV:15.

¹³ *Ibid*, XVI:308.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, IV:45.

Owen makes it sound as if ever since the apostolic age saving faith in Christ has in all cases depended necessarily on prior faith in the divinity of Scripture. Did Owen really mean this, we ask. Was it his view that nobody could believe savingly till he knew and accepted the Bible? And what would Owen make of the fact that some today give evidence of ‘divine, supernatural, infallible’ faith in Christ while professing not fully to share his own faith in the ‘divine original’ of Scripture?

To the two former questions, the answer seems to be that Owen’s controversial preoccupation explains his form of statement. Against the mistaken Roman thesis that the proper ground of faith in Christ is the church’s witness—in other words, human testimony—Owen is insisting that the proper ground of faith is biblical witness—in other words, divine testimony. He is speaking against the background of his own day, in which Bibles were available for all, the plenary inspiration and truthfulness of Scripture were not yet challenged, and the only question at issue was whether faith should rest directly on biblical testimony or not. If asked whether a man could come to true saving faith on the basis of an accurate account of the biblical message which made no reference to the Bible itself (such as missionaries abroad, or apologists at home, might sometimes present), Owen would doubtless have replied that in the beneficent sovereignty of God such a thing might well happen, but that it was not this kind of situation that he was discussing in the writings under review.

On the third question, Owen could in terms of his principles make three sound points, each tending to show that when a person who gives evidence in other ways of saving faith in Christ claims not to accept the ‘divine original’ of Scripture, the claim should not be taken as seriously as it is made. (Owen’s instincts would probably have led him to start by making the opposite point, that doubt of the divinity of Scripture is so anomalous in a believer as to suggest that such doubters are probably hypocrites!—but his own principles would also lead to the thesis as we are stating.)

First, Owen could observe that the only Christ there is is the Christ of the Bible, and that faith in this Christ necessarily presupposes faith in at least the main substance of what Scripture says about him—which is not very different from saying that real faith in the real Christ rests on faith in the divine truth of a good deal of the Bible.

Second, he could point out that in the New Testament itself faith in Christ is represented as consequent and dependent on receiving the apostolic message as God’s own word of truth (see Rom 10:14-17; Col 1:4-7; 1 Thess 1:5-10; 2:13), and that the New Testament is no more, just as it is no less, than the substance of this apostolic message in writing.

Third, he could make the point that the ministry of the Spirit enlightening sinners to receive the man Jesus as the divine Saviour, and the human Scriptures as the divine word, is one ministry, and that everyone in whose heart the Spirit bears witness to the divine saviourhood of Jesus does in fact receive a similar testimony to the ‘divine original’ of such of the canonical Scriptures as he knows; though confusion and weakness of mind, springing from the remnants of corruption within him and fomented by anti-Christian thought-currents around him in an age of unbelief, may prevent him from giving adequate intellectual expression to this. Owen would certainly have dwelt on the debilitating effect of this intellectual besetting sin, just as he does elsewhere in connection with errors regarding other doctrines, but there is no reason to ascribe to him

the view that a man who was muddle-headed about biblical infallibility could not be a Christian at all.

4

But how does faith in ‘God’s word written’ come about? This brings us to our next two themes, the first of which, and the third in our overall order, is *the authentication of Scripture*.

The Holy Spirit, the Author of Scripture, says Owen, causes his work to be received with divine faith, as God’s word, by means of a twofold operation: His *external* witness and His *internal* witness. The latter is ‘the internal work of the Holy Spirit on the minds of men, enabling them to believe’; the former is ‘the external work of the same Holy Spirit giving evidence in and by the Scripture unto its own divine original’.¹⁵ The former presupposes, and is correlative to, the latter, and both belong to the statement of the classic Reformed doctrine, first given prominence by Calvin in the *Institutes*, of the witness of the Spirit as the ground of faith in the Scriptures. In stating this against the Church of Rome, which laid emphasis on the external testimony of the church. Calvin had stressed the internal witness of the Spirit and had given no separate attention to the point that there is also an external testimony of the Spirit to which his inward witness in the believer’s heart corresponds. What is distinctive about Owen’s presentation of this doctrine, as compared with Calvin’s, is the stress that he lays on the Spirit’s external witness. His doctrine is thus of a double testimony of the Holy Spirit to Scripture; its effect is to draw out and make explicit what is implicit in Calvin’s statements on the subject, at points where these statements are not fully developed.¹⁶ It is the external witness of the Spirit that we deal with now.

‘Herein consists that testimony which the Spirit gives unto the Word of God that it is so,’ writes Owen. ‘The Holy Ghost being the immediate author of the whole Scripture, doth therein and thereby give testimony unto the divine truth and original of it, by the characters of divine authority and veracity impressed on it, and evidencing themselves in its power and efficacy’.¹⁷ By this means ‘the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, do abundantly and uncontrollably manifest themselves to be the word of the living God’.¹⁸

How does the Spirit bring about this effect? By a threefold activity. First, he imparts to the Scriptures the permanent quality of *light*. Owen appeals to biblical references to Scripture as ‘light in a dark place’ (2 Pet 1:19), a ‘light’ to men’s feet and a lamp to their path (Ps 119:105), a word whose entrance gives ‘light’ (130), and other similar passages. By light, Owen means that which dispels darkness and illuminates people and situations. Light, by its very nature, is self-evidencing. ‘Let a light be ever so

¹⁵ *Ibid*, IV:102.

¹⁶ Owen cites Calvin’s classic statement on the inner witness of the Spirit, *Institutes*, I:vii:5; IV:68f.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, IV:72f.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, XVI:307.

mean and contemptible; yet if it shines, it casts out beams and rays in a dark place, it will evidence itself.’¹⁹ Scripture, through the covenanted action of the Holy Spirit, constantly ‘shines’, in the sense of giving spiritual illumination and insight as to who and what one is in the sight of God, and who and what Jesus Christ is, both in himself and in relation to one’s own self and finally, in the broadest and most inclusive sense, how one ought to live. Thus it makes evident its divine origin.

Second, the Spirit makes the Scriptures *powerful* to produce spiritual effects. They evidence their divine origin by their disruptive and recreative impact on human lives. Owen quotes in this connection the biblical descriptions of the word of God as ‘quick and powerful’, ‘able to build you up’, and ‘the power of God’ (Heb 4:12; Acts 20:31; 1 Cor 1:18).

Third, the Holy Spirit makes Scripture impinge on the individual consciousness as a word *addressed personally* to each man by God himself, evoking awe, and a sense of being in God’s presence and under his eye. This is what Owen means when he speaks of the ‘majesty’ of the Scriptures. So he writes: ‘the Holy Ghost speaking in and by the word imparting to it virtue, power, efficacy, majesty, and authority, affords us the witness, that our faith is resolved into’.²⁰

Thus, through the action of the Holy Spirit, Scripture evidences and authenticates itself as the word of God. ‘Must we not rest at last in that *to theion* [divine quality], which accompanies the true voice of God, evidencing itself and ascertaining the soul beyond all possibility of mistake?’²¹

What Owen is saying here is more straightforward, perhaps, than his language at first reveals. His point is simply that the unique enlightening and convicting power with which the canonical Scriptures come at us is itself ‘the public testimony of the Holy Spirit given to all, of the Word, by and in the Word’.²² Part of the distinctiveness of the canonical books lies in the fact that this testimony constantly accompanies them: ‘I fear not to affirm that there are on every individual book of the Scriptures . divine characters and criteria which are sufficient to difference them from all other writings whatever, and to testify their divine authority unto the minds and consciences of believers.’²³ It is in terms of this testimony, this constant outflow of light and power, that the self-evidencing quality of the Bible and its message should, according to Owen, be described and explained. That the Bible, like all messages and revelations from God, has this quality is proved by the fact that it is always the duty of those to whom any part of the written word

¹⁹ *Ibid*, XVI:320.

²⁰ *Ibid*, XVI:328.

²¹ *Ibid*, XVI:318; cf viii:537: ‘We believe it [Scripture] not because men have ministerially led us to receive it, or told us that is of God; but because we ourselves have heard and felt him speaking in it. The Spirit shines into our mind by the light of the word, and speaks loudly to our hearts by the power of it, and plainly tells us whose word it is; and so makes us yield to God’s authority.’

²² *Ibid*, XVI:328.

²³ *Ibid*, IV:107.

comes to receive and obey it, and failure to do this is always guilty. (For proof of this, Owen cites, among other passages, Deuteronomy 31:11-13; Luke 16:31; 2 Peter 1:16-21.)

This leads us to our fourth topic: *the establishing of faith in Scripture*. The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, whereby the external testimony comes to be recognised and received, is not, says Owen, an inward voice, revealing facts otherwise unknown and unknowable (that is, a private revelation), nor is it an unreasoning conviction, objectively groundless, coming to us out of the blue; it is, rather, an activity of inward illumination, whereby a man's natural spiritual blindness is removed, the veil is taken from the eyes of his heart, his pride and his prejudice are alike broken down, and he is given both an understanding and a 'taste' (Heb 5:14) of spiritual realities. This, Owen observes, is what the New Testament is referring to when it uses the verb 'reveal' in texts like Matthew 11:25-27 and Ephesians 1:17-19, and it is also what the apostle John has in mind when he speaks of the Spirit as an 'unction' that 'teaches all things' (1 John 2:27).

The mark of this understanding is that Scripture now appears coherent: to the man enlightened by the Spirit, Scripture is no longer a bewildering jumble of isolated items, as it may well have seemed to him before, but 'under the benefit of this assistance all the parts of the Scripture, in their harmony and correspondency, all the truths of it in their power and necessity, come in together to give evidence one to another, and all of them to the whole.'²⁴ Part chimes in with part, Scripture meshes with Scripture, and the unified bearing of the whole Bible becomes apparent. The accompanying experience of the 'taste', or 'flavour' of spiritual realities is immediate and ineffable; Owen describes it as follows:

He [the Spirit] gives unto believers a spiritual sense of the power and reality of the things believed, whereby their faith is greatly established. . . . And on the account of this spiritual experience, is our perception of spiritual things so often expressed by acts of sense, as tasting, seeing, feeling, and the like means of assurance in things natural. And when believers have attained hereunto, they do find the divine wisdom, goodness, and authority of God so present unto them, as that they need neither argument, nor motive, or anything else, to persuade them unto, or confirm them in, believing. And whereas this spiritual experience, which believers obtain through the Holy Ghost, is such as cannot rationally be contended about, seeing those who have received it, cannot fully express it, and those who have not, cannot understand it, nor the efficacy which it has to secure and establish the mind; it is left to be determined on by them alone, who have their 'senses exercised to discern good and evil'. And this belongs unto the internal subjective testimony of the Holy Ghost.²⁵

Also, the Spirit upholds those whom he enlightens against temptations to question the divinity of Scripture, from whatever source they spring—lust, unbelief, pressure of opposing argument, waning of the sense of God and his authority, or any other spiritual

²⁴ *Ibid*, XVI:327.

²⁵ *Ibid*, IV:64.

malaise. All this belongs to the inner witness of the Spirit, as Owen describes it. His is in truth the richest exposition of the subject that I know.

The grounds, then, on which we have faith in Scripture as the word of God are the Spirit's external witness to its divine origin, which is given in and with it constantly; and the reason why we so believe, is 'because the Holy Ghost hath enlightened our minds, wrought faith in us, and enabled us to believe it'.²⁶ And the way to bring others to like faith is simply to let the Bible and its message get at them, so that the Spirit may fulfil the same ministry towards them too. As Owen points out, the apostles' way of convincing men that their message was divine was not by 'rational arguments', but 'by preaching the word itself unto them in the evidence and demonstration of the Spirit, by the power whereof manifesting the authority of God in it, they were convinced; and falling down acknowledged God to be in it of a truth' (1 Cor 2:4, 5; 15:25, 26).²⁷

5

So we come to our final topic: *the interpreting of the Scriptures*.

Owen's first point under this head is the standard Protestant point that Scripture is perspicuous, in the sense that every Christian who uses the means of grace as he should, can learn from it all that he needs to know for life and godliness. This formula is not, however, a warrant for anyone to go off on his own with a Bible and expect to learn everything by reading it in isolation; Owen makes this plain by listing as the prime means of grace, which personal Bible study presupposes, those afforded by the corporate life of the Christian community, namely the public preaching of the word and informal discussion with Christian people. On the former Owen lays great emphasis, as being the principal means appointed in the church for the instruction of God's people. Of the latter, he writes:

The mutual instruction of one another in the mind of God out of the Scripture, is also required . . . when our Saviour found His disciples talking of the things of God by the way-side, He bearing unto them the person of a private man, instructed them in the sense of Scripture (Luke 24:26, 27, 32). And the neglect of this duty in the world, which is so great that the very mention of it, or the least attempt to perform it, is a matter of scorn and reproach, is one cause of the great ignorance and darkness that yet abounds among us.²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid*, IV:60.

²⁷ *Ibid*, IV:103.

²⁸ *Ibid*, IV:13.

This may be a word in season in our own day. Only in the context of the church's corporate learning from the Scriptures, both formally and informally, does Owen expect the individual to reach a right understanding of biblical teaching.

But even then it is not easy. Inbred spiritual evils—pride, corrupt affection, sloth, a darkened mind, temperamental traditionalism, and sinful rationalisations—hinder our progress, and these evils can only be countered and overcome by spiritual means. So, in a most searching chapter,²⁹ Owen, having spoken of the need for careful and meditative reading of the biblical text, in large units as well as in small, goes on to list as necessary 'spiritual' means of understanding it, over and above getting acquainted with its linguistic and cultural background and consulting commentaries and the history of exposition, these following: constant prayer for light; a desire to experience the power of whatever truth may be learned; a conscientious practice of obedience to all truth known at present; and a life of worship in the church. Though written in the usual dull style (dull even for him!) which Owen affected when writing about the Scriptures, this chapter is veritable dynamite, and deserves reading and re-reading by all who desire to prove the perspicuity of Scripture for themselves.

Of the contents and layout of the Bible, as Owen saw them, little can be said here. Owen viewed the Bible as a landscape, part of whose charm and impact on the viewer lies in its lack of order in surface arrangement. 'The Holy Spirit hath not in the Scripture reduced and disposed its doctrines or supernatural truths into any system, order, or method', although 'there is indeed in some of the epistles of Paul, especially that unto the Romans, a methodical disposition of the most important doctrines of the gospel.'³⁰ Generally, Owen saw Scripture as consisting of doctrines (facts about God) and examples of their application—the doctrinal principles interpreting the narratives, and the narratives illustrating the doctrinal principles. Owen insists that the existing arrangement of the biblical books is in fact more practical and useful than any other would be; it summons us to the right kind of meditative study, and shields us against the temptation to intellectual pride in doctrinal knowledge. Moreover, truth as it stands in Scripture is already in a 'posture' to exert 'power and efficacy,' and the demand of adjustment to its style and layout puts students into the right 'posture' to receive and profit from it practically. As we prayerfully wait on God, so the holy message is made known and applied to us in all its converting and transforming power.

Owen makes this point very strikingly in answer to the complaint that the Bible is obscure because 'it is not distributed into *common-places*,' (i.e., distinct topics, each exhaustively expounded in one place), but requires us to gather its truths 'out of a *collection of histories, prophecies, prayers, songs, letters*. . . .' writes as follows:

Such a *systematical proposal of doctrines*, truths, or articles of faith, as some require, would not have answered the great ends of the Scripture itself. All that can be supposed of benefit thereby is only that it would lead us more easily into a *methodical comprehension* of the truths so proposed; but this we may attain, and not be rendered one jot more *like unto God* thereby. The principal end of the Scriptures is of another nature. It is, to

²⁹ 'Causes, Ways, and Means', chap 7; IV:199-209.

³⁰ *Ibid*, IV:188.

beget in the minds of men faith, fear, obedience, and reverence of God—to make them holy and righteous. . . . Unto this end every truth is disposed of in the Scripture as it ought to be. If any expect that the Scripture should be written with respect unto *opinions, notions, and speculations*, to render men *skillful* and cunning in them, able to talk and dispute . . . they are mistaken. It is given to make us *humble, holy, wise* in spiritual things; to direct us in our *duties*, to relieve us in our *temptations*, to comfort us under *troubles*, to make us to love God and to live unto him. . . . Unto this end there is a more glorious power and efficacy in one *epistle, one psalm, one chapter*, than in all the writings of men. . . . He that hath not experience hereof is a stranger unto the power of God in the Scripture . . . sometimes an *occasional passage in a story*, a word or expressions, shall contribute more to excite faith and love in our souls than a volume of learned disputations. . . .³¹

Thus God communicates with us, to our soul's health.

If we now ask what exactly it is that he communicates, the short answer is, knowledge of ourselves, and of Christ, as set forth in the *Westminster Confession* and in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; but we cannot amplify this answer here.³²

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Question 4 of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* reads: 'How does it appear that the Scriptures are the word of God?' The answer is:

The Scriptures manifest themselves to be the word of God, by their majesty and purity; by the consent of all the parts, and the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God; by their light and power to convince and convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation. But the Spirit of God, bearing witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man, is alone able fully to persuade it that they are the very word of God.

Owen's doctrine of divine communication, as we have seen, merely spells out this position. That his doctrine is scriptural, suggestive, and spiritual to a high degree will

³¹ *Ibid*, IV:188-190.

³² 'The end of the Word itself, is to instruct us in the knowledge of God in Christ' (I:65). 'Then do we find food for our souls in the Word of truth, then do we taste how gracious the Lord is therein, then is the Scripture full of refreshment unto us as a spring of living water,—when we are taken into blessed views of the glory of Christ therein' (I:316). Owen's interpretation of Scripture is rigorously and resolutely Christ-centered (though in Calvin's way rather than Barth's); for Owen views Christ as ontologically the only Saviour and epistemologically the only full disclosure to us of the glory of God, and he wants all whom he instructs to see and honour Christ as he himself does.

hardly be disputed. That the Barthian criticism does not apply to him (nor, for that matter, to the Westminster divines) is also clear; one could hardly have a more complete or dynamic doctrine of the Spirit bringing home the word to God's people than that which Owen sets forth.

What lessons has this study for us? It reminds us that Scripture is always the best evidence for itself, and that preaching biblical truth in the power of the Holy Ghost will do more than any amount of arguing to bring about faith in biblical inspiration, and in the divine realities which Scripture proclaims. It also challenges us to ask ourselves whether in our own searching and teaching of the Scriptures we are honouring the Holy Ghost as we should. When problems of interpretation arise, how much and how hard do we pray? And are we who preach wholly men of the word? Is it our glory, as Christian instructors, to refuse to do anything save expound and apply the word of God? May our study of Owen's doctrine of communication from God renew our zeal to fulfil such a ministry, and our confidence in the fruitfulness that, under God, such a ministry will have.

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