

**Opening the Gates to Heaven  
Reforming Worship Conference  
February 2013**

**'Do we expect the Holy Spirit to transform us and lift us up to heaven us in worship?'**

My interest in the nature of the worship we offer goes back over the years to the range of different services I've been privileged to be part of, across the UK and in several different parts of the world. I've been struck by the enormous diversity of worship offered, from that which is offered in silence, to that which involves continual singing – whether of a Pentecostal or an eastern orthodox variety. I'm interested to note that there sometimes seems to be a correlation between the centrality of the Spirit and the length of the service, with both Pentecostal and eastern orthodox services being much longer than the usual URC offering!

Four years ago, when I came to the end of my term of office as West Midlands Synod moderator, I had the opportunity to work half time in a pastorate and undertake further research for the other half of my time. I registered for a PhD at King's College, London, in order to look into the area of the Holy Spirit and worship. Many people, when I say that this is my area of interest, assume that I am studying Pentecostal or charismatic worship. I am in fact looking at the role of the Holy Spirit in the mainstream Christian traditions, partly to ask whether the Spirit has, in desperation at the Spirit's neglect in the traditional churches, gone off to the Pentecostal and charismatic churches!

Having spent some time reading around the general area of the Holy Spirit and worship, and as part of the requirement of a PhD at King's to focus on a particular person, I decided to look in greater depth at John Owen, 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan divine, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, vice-chancellor of Oxford University, and leading light amongst the separatist ministers and congregations after the ejection of 2000 clergy from their livings as a result of the Act of Uniformity in 1662.

I was in part drawn to Owen as a result of re-reading 'The Holy Spirit and Puritan Experience' the seminal work by Geoffrey Nuttall, one of my college teachers, in the early 70's. My attention was drawn both to the significant role of the Holy Spirit amongst Puritanism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in England, and to the way in which Owen had written extensively about the Holy Spirit, primarily in his work *Pneumatologia*, but also in a number of his other writings, including *Communion with God, the Holy Spirit as Comforter, the Holy Spirit and prayer*. Alongside these workings, there are his writings on worship, in particular addressing, from a somewhat polemical perspective, the concern about liturgies that are imposed upon a congregation.

In my subsequent reading around this period, I discovered two other intriguing aspects about the 17<sup>th</sup> century, that support my interest in pursuing the writings of Owen.

The first of these is the work of Richard A. Muller, who has written extensively on Reformed dogmatics and who is part of a movement to revive the role of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Reformed theologians in relation to Calvin. He argues that a large part of 18<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship on the Reformation either ignored those who came after Calvin, or accused them of moving away from Calvin in a much more rigid direction. Muller maintains for a range of reasons, which I don't have time to go into in this paper, that the whole issue of Calvin and the Calvinists is much more complex than is made out, and that more attention needs to be given to the intellectual origins behind both Calvin and his successors, in terms of the debt they owe to the thinkers of the early and medieval church. More

attention also needs to be given to the writings of those who succeeded Calvin, to see the ways in which they both developed his ideas and added their own thinking.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> intriguing aspect comes out of the work of a growing body of writers who argue that the 17<sup>th</sup> century was a turning point for thinking about the Trinity. In fact, it was not just a turning point, so the argument goes, it was the century in which the Trinity became a doctrine, instead of a lived, experienced reality. Once it had become a doctrine, it became separated from people's everyday lives and subject to arcane debates which didn't really interest people or fire them up. The truth of this and its effects was seen in a British Council of Churches study in the 1980's entitled 'the Forgotten Trinity' which looked at the way the Trinity had been neglected in recent centuries. What's interesting is that since then there have been a growing number of works on the Trinity.

The reality of the neglect of the Trinity came home to me a few years ago when I was speaking at a conference and touched on the Trinity. In the conversation after my talk, a Methodist minister made the comment that in Methodism, Trinity Sunday is the day for lay preachers to lead worship, so that ministers can escape from such complexities. I was impressed at the theological wisdom attributed to lay preachers!

I mention these two factors to set the scene for John Owen's theological writing, in particular on sanctification, and in order to look at the role of sanctification and worship. I am aware that in itself 'sanctification' is not a word in common currency. Yet I think that the ideas which underlie sanctification are still worth exploring and help to deepen our theological understanding with regard to worship.

Sanctification picks up on the verse in 1 Peter 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.' I am aware that 'holy' is also not a word in great favour. In fact I heard of a church a few years ago which decided it would no longer be called 'Holy Trinity' and instead renamed itself 'Trinity', thinking that this would be a more popular title and less confusing to the general public. Holiness has some negative associations with a particular kind of moral conduct, and with people who feel that their understanding of moral conduct should be imposed upon others.

Owen, in his writing on the Holy Spirit, emphasises sanctification. For him, sanctification is about the work of the Holy Spirit in human life, filling the person with the power and presence of God so that, consequent upon this in-filling, the person can live a godly or holy life. This life does include right moral conduct, but this moral conduct arises out of the Spirit's work within, rather than out of human effort. Owen also makes the point that sanctification is not just something that happens at one moment, it is a lifelong matter, as people grow in dependence on the Spirit. This has a particular setting in relation to worship. The Spirit inspires worship; the Spirit is effective in worship and the Spirit is to be worshipped. The emphasis is on our human dependence on the Holy Spirit. However Owen also highlights the need to prepare to receive the Spirit. The Spirit does not only come unexpectedly and in ways that surprise. We can prepare ourselves to be open to receive the Spirit. The offering of worship is also part of our preparation.

For Owen, sanctification has an inner and an outer emphasis.

The inner emphasis is about the possibility of personal renewal. I want in more contemporary language to refer to this as transformation. The Spirit enables God's work of transformation, begun in creation and supremely focussed in Jesus Christ, to be taken in to the lives of particular people. There is an expectation that change will happen and will be seen to happen. The old self, separated from God, focussed on darkness and sin, will be transformed into the new self, filled with joy and vitality and love. This is not a one off moment of change, but rather a lifelong growth into God.

This personal renewal is about the person rather than the individual. And here I look at what I am referring to as the 'outer' focus of sanctification.

Owen sees sanctification as the gift of the Holy Spirit. He is critical of those who see the Spirit as a kind of inanimate force, or as not a person in the Trinity, or as solely the light within each person. His argument is based on the writing of the early Fathers, especially those of the fourth century, when there were great debates as to who the Holy Spirit was, whether the Spirit was created or uncreated, how the Spirit related to God and the Spirit's role as part of the Trinity. Out of this he argues for the understanding of the Spirit to be fully seen in personal terms, rather than as an impersonal power or force. He emphasises the two great, equal but different, roles of the Son and the Spirit in the drama of salvation. I want to argue, based also on the writings of John Zizioulas, an orthodox theologian who also goes back to the early fathers, that seeing the Spirit as person, rather than force, and as person as part of the communion of persons within the Trinity, leads to a definition of person i.e. that a person is in communion, in relationship. The Spirit as personal, working in the lives of persons, places the weight on the significance of personhood and identifies persons as being persons when in relationship.

What I am calling the 'outer' focus of sanctification is placing an emphasis on the otherness of the Spirit, who is at work within us.

In this short paper I don't have time to spell this out in detail. But I want to put forward three conclusions.

1. That the personal work of the Spirit in sanctification, is about enabling us to be persons rather than individuals. This cuts against the drive of Descartes and others to understand the person in terms of self-consciousness rather than in relationship. I think the outcome of this has been well summarised in the joke about moving from 'cogito ergo sum' to 'tesco ergo sum'. An individual, driven by the self, lands up as seeing shopping as the really important thing in life.
2. That the emphasis on the personal work of Spirit as part of the community of relationship within the Trinity, helps us to focus again on the Trinity as a living reality, not an abstruse doctrine. This is the way we think about and know God. This is our fundamental understanding of reality, not as alien and fragmented, but as loving and calling us into loving relationships.
3. This personal emphasis has a fulfilment in our shared offering of worship, where we gather together as disparate people, but bound in a unity that goes beyond our human comprehension, because it is a unity with the fullness of the Trinity. Worship is the point at which we know sanctification, and where we grow into God.

I want to finish with some implications for today:

- We need to raise the expectation about worship, that it will be an encounter with God;
- We need to emphasise the importance of public worship, where people gather together to offer worship to God, and to receive from God
- We can expect to be transformed;
- Being made holy isn't necessarily comfortable: the Holy Spirit is comforter and discomforter
- This focus on worship means being sitting lightly to ourselves and all our attachments, rather than seeing ourselves at the centre
- This focus on worship means being open to what might come/happen next.

I am aware that this is a very brief analysis of the issues, but I hope it will make some small contribution to our ongoing discussions across the church, particularly in seeing the value of focusing on the role of the Holy Spirit in worship as indeed 'lifting us up to heaven.'

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