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John Owen On The Spirit In The Life Of Christ

by Sinclair B. Ferguson

[For two decades now the Trust has been committed to republishing and keeping in print the works of John Owen. All over the English-speaking world there exists testimony to the incalculable value of his biblical teaching in many vital areas of Christian doctrine and experience. For some time now, our associate editor Sinclair B. Ferguson has been working on a book on Owen's theology, under the unifying theme of the Christian life. Last month the Trust published his extensive exposition of Owen's teaching, *John Owen on the Christian Life*.

While this is the first book-length study of Owen's theology ever to be published, Sinclair Ferguson's main aim has been to make Owen more accessible. As well as providing an exposition of many areas of Owen's teaching, *John Owen on the Christian Life* also serves as a 'reader's guide' to Owen's writings. In both these ways it will serve pastors, teachers and all serious Christians in their study in those areas in which John Owen has proved to be a true doctor of the church.

The article which follows, the substance of an address given at the Leicester Ministers' Conference, 1986, while not an extract from *John Owen on the Christian Life*, yet serves to illustrate the rich veins of teaching to be found almost everywhere in Owen's writings.]

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It is said, sometimes with embarrassing frequency, that until recent decades the Holy Spirit was 'the forgotten Person in the Godhead'. It is assumed in such a statement that only in the second half of the twentieth century has there been a recovery of biblical teaching. Only now has the Holy Spirit been given the central place he merits in evangelical thinking.

The word 'embarrassing' is not used here carelessly. For such statements suffer from a characteristic modernism—a false assumption that our discovery of something must be epochal in its significance. But the truth of the matter is that this century is yet to produce an evangelical work on the Holy Spirit which merits comparison with the great and biblically creative studies of the past. It is doubtful if we moderns begin to approximate to the experimental and intellectual wrestlings of our forefathers (whether Father, Reformers or Puritans) in their desire to know the 'communion of the Holy Spirit' [2 Cor. 13:14].

In this context, it is worth reminding ourselves that probably no writer has produced a treatise on the Holy Spirit which begins to rival the detailed exposition of John Owen's great study in his *Pneumatologia*. Much attention has been rightly focused on Owen's quasi Ph.D. dissertation, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, and on his great studies on the nature, power and conquest of indwelling sin, *Works*. But Owen himself seems to have regarded the material now contained in volumes III and IV of Goold's edition of his *Works* as his special contribution to the theology of the Christian Church. What follows is not intended as a major redress of that balance, so much as an *hors d'oeuvre*, designed to give a taste of the riches of Owen's *Pneumatology*. At the same time it will point to an area of our thinking about the Holy Spirit which too frequently continues to be overlooked in our thoughts of him, and in our teaching about him.

There were three reasons for Owen's self-conscious focus on the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit.

1. Historical. Born in 1616, Owen died in 1683. He was 58 when his multi-volumed *Pneumatologia* began to appear. Able to look back over the 150 years since the Reformation, he could assess the planting, budding, and flowering of reformed theology, and its application to the life of society in seventeenth-century Puritanism. He realised that central to the Reformation's rediscovery of the gospel had been the place, person and power of the Spirit. He saw (as Warfield later did) that Calvin was the theologian of the Holy Spirit. This was what made reformed Christianity different. In this point at least he might well have agreed with the view of Edmund Campion (the famous sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary in England) that the greatest difference between Rome and Geneva lay in the doctrine of the person and work of the Spirit.

Why should this be the case? Because the Reformation's emphasis on the ministry of the Spirit took salvation out of the hands of the Church and put it back where it belonged, in the hands of God!

Yet Owen recognised that no comprehensive treatment of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit had appeared in print:

I know not any who ever went before me in this design of representing the whole economy of the Holy Spirit, with all his adjuncts, operations and effects. [*Works*, III, 7]

Thus, now twice the age he had been when he authored *The Death of Death*, Owen began to do for the doctrine of the Spirit what he had done in his late twenties for the doctrine of the extent of the atonement.

But there was a second reason for his writing:

2. *Polemical*. In Owen's day, as in ours, there existed a special need to expound, accurately and biblically, the ministry of the Spirit. Indeed, part of the value of his work for us today lies in the way he had to fight on two fronts:

(i) He faced an unbiblical rationalism, which gave little or no place to the Spirit. It was nurtured on the illusion of man's autonomy, and blindly suggested that natural Christianity was an adequate substitute for supernatural grace.

(ii) He also faced an unbiblical Spirit-ism, which stressed the immediacy of the Spirit's work and of individual divine revelation. It down-played the significance of the Scriptures, exalting the so-called 'Christ within' above the Christ of Scripture, and the 'inner light' above the light of the Word. Owen recognised that this displacement of Scripture would eventually lead to its abandonment: 'He that would utterly separate the Spirit from the word had as good burn his Bible' [*Works*, III, 192].

But there was a third reason for Owen's exposition:

3. *Personal*. Owen was brought up in a home of settled Puritan convictions. In a rare personal comment he tells us that his father was 'a Non-conformist all his days, and a painful labourer [i.e. one who 'took pains' in his work] in the vineyard of the Lord' [*Works*, XIII, 224]. As Calvin said of Timothy, he had drunk in godliness with his mother's milk. But his own experience taught him what he later called the difference between the knowledge of the truth, and the knowledge of the power of the truth. Only the latter was of real spiritual significance. Spiritual things can be known only by the power of the Spirit. Owen's earliest biographer suggests he struggled for a lengthy period without enjoying personal assurance of God's grace. His own experience of receiving it was, for him, a paradigm of how the Spirit works: sovereignly, Christ-centredly and biblically [*Works*, VI, 324]. So, it was not merely as a widely-read theologian, nor only as a polemicist, but as a believer, that Owen penned his treatise on the Holy Spirit.

Owen's teaching on the Spirit's ministry is spread throughout many of his writings, but is particularly concentrated in volumes III and IV in his *Pneumatologia*. Here he draws attention, in seminal fashion, to a theme of great theological importance, and one that is determinative for our personal knowledge of communion with the Holy Spirit: The Ministry of the Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Christ.

Owen refers with some frequency to the description of the Messiah in the Royal Wedding Psalm:

You love righteousness and hate wickedness
Therefore, God your God, has set you above your companions
by anointing you with the oil of joy [Ps. 45:6-7]

Two questions arise here: (i) Who is the person addressed? Owen finds the biblical answer in *Hebrews* 1:9. These words are spoken ‘about the Son’. (ii) What is the anointing referred to? Owen answers that it is the anointing of Jesus with the Spirit. Jesus is the one to whom the Spirit is given without measure [*Jn.* 3:34].

What Owen focuses our attention on is that Jesus Christ, whom we often think of as the Bestower or Baptiser with the Spirit, is first of all the Recipient or Bearer of the Spirit. As Jesus’ obedience to the Father grew in harmony with his developing capacities as a man and the demands of his ministry as the Messiah, so he received the power of the Spirit’s anointing for each step of his way.

It is an axiom, then, for Owen: *The Spirit works on the Head of the New Creation, Jesus Christ, and thus creates the source, cause, and pattern of his working throughout the new creation, in believers.*

But how did this teaching work itself out? Owen points us essentially to the four central divisions of Jesus’ life: (1) Incarnation; (2) Ministry; (3) Passion; and (4) Exaltation.

1. The Ministry Of The Spirit In The Incarnation Of Christ

Owen recognised the value of the old Latin axiom: *Opera ad extra trinitatis indivisa sunt* [the external works of the Trinity are not divisible, they are all works of the entire Trinity]. Nowhere is its truth more evident than in the incarnation. There, Father and Son were both active. The Father prepared a body for His Son [*Heb.* 10:5]; the Son took hold of the seed of Abraham [*Heb.* 2:14]. But, Owen adds, neither of these actions took place apart from the ministry of the Spirit. In the incarnation, he worked in two ways:

(i) *Jesus was conceived by the power of the Spirit.* The conception of Jesus in the womb of the virgin Mary has all the hallmarks of the Spirit’s operations.

Just as the Spirit overshadowed the waters in creation and later overshadowed the church at Pentecost, so he came to Mary—sovereignly and secretly—and took her already existing substance in order to form it into a humanity that was altogether holy [Lk. 1:35]. The humanity which was assumed by the Son of God really was that of Mary. Jesus was conceived by Mary in her womb by the overshadowing of the Spirit. From the first moment of his conception he experienced human development and every stage of human existence [Heb. 2:17-18].

But that immediately leads to the second aspect of the Spirit's work:

(ii) *Jesus was sanctified by the power of the Spirit.* There are two questions in Christology which Owen believed can be answered only when we take account of the ministry of the Spirit in the Incarnation. How did Jesus become fully one with us? And, how did Jesus become fully one with us, yet remain free from sin?

Owen's answer was that the Son of God really shared our humanity [Heb. 2:14]. He rejected all forms of Docetism. The holy humanity of Jesus was real humanity. It was earthly, not heavenly. The virgin Mary was truly 'the mother of my Lord' [Lk. 1:43], not merely the channel through which the humanity of Jesus entered this fallen world. [This view had been held at the time of the Reformation by (among others) Melchior Hoffman (d. 1543) and was taught by Menno Simons (1496-1561), founder of the Mennonites. The latter's view was related, at least in part, to his deficient understanding of human biology. It should be noted that his view did not become part of Mennonite theology.] By the Spirit, Jesus came from among us. But, having given this affirmation of the reality of Christ's humanity, Owen was careful to avoid the pseudo-logical deduction sometimes drawn from it—that the Son of God must therefore have assumed *sinful* humanity. No, says Owen, Scripture teaches us that through the overshadowing of the Spirit, that which was born was holy [Lk. 1:35], the Son of God. At the very moment of conception and assumption, the Holy Spirit sanctified the human nature of Jesus equipping him as Son of God to be the Saviour of men. Consequently Jesus was not only (in a negative sense) separate from sinners, he was positively endowed with all appropriate grace, and was holy and harmless, as well as undefiled [Heb. 7:26].

What is so significant about this for Owen? This: the consequence of the Spirit's ministry in the Head of the new creation is that he is *truly man and truly holy*. In Jesus, holiness and humanity become one and the same thing, perfectly, for the first time since Adam.

Why should this be so relevant to the continuing ministry of the Spirit? Because our Lord Jesus Christ is the *cause, source, and pattern* of the Spirit's ministry in the believer. What he did in Jesus he seeks to do in us! In a word, Owen is saying: true humanity is true godliness; true holiness is true manliness or true womanliness! *Whatever is dehumanising* them, cannot be the fruit of the Spirit's ministry in us. Whatever makes you less human must be carnal, not spiritual.

That fundamental principle is of tremendous significance in Owen's theology, even although it is not one he expounds at great length. Indeed, in one sense his chief exposition of it is not to be found in his published works, but in his own life. Shortly after Owen's death, these words were written about him: there was in him:

Much of heaven and love to Christ and saints and all men; which came from him so seriously and spontaneously as if grace and nature were in him reconciled and but one thing.'

The purpose of the Spirit's ministry is to conform us to the image of the Incarnate Son, in order that he might be the firstborn of many brothers [Rom. 8:29]. John Owen apparently expounded this principle chiefly by his own personal example.

2.The Ministry Of The Spirit In The Ministry Of Jesus Christ

For John Owen, it was axiomatic that Jesus Christ 'acted grace as a man'. He did this (as men must) through the energy of the Spirit. That was evident in two ways:

(i) *In his personal progress in grace.* The work of the Spirit in the Messiah was prophesied in *Isaiah* 11:1-3 and also in 63:1ff. Owen saw great significance in the prophecy that it was by the Spirit that the Messiah would be filled with wisdom, and that this characteristic was singled out for reference in Luke's account of Jesus' growth [*Lk.* 2:52]. In this sense, the coming of the Spirit on Jesus involved a continuous presence. In keeping with the development of his natural faculties as man, and his unique responsibilities as Messiah, he was sustained by the Spirit. The Spirit enabled Jesus to do natural things perfectly and spiritually, not to do them unnaturally. He was taught the wisdom of God from the Word of God by the Spirit of God! This is precisely the picture we are given in the third Servant Song:

The Sovereign Lord has given me the instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back [*Isa.* 50:4-9].

Each step of his way, it was through the word of the Father in Scripture, illuminated by his constant companion, the Spirit, that Jesus grew in the knowledge of the Lord. So, writes Owen:

In the representation then, of things anew to the human nature of Christ, the wisdom and knowledge of [his human nature] was objectively increased and in new trials and temptations he experimentally learned the new exercise of grace. And this was the constant work of the Holy Spirit on the human nature of Christ. He dwelt in him in fulness, for he received not him by measure. And continually, upon all occasions he gave out of his unsearchable treasures grace for exercise in all duties and instances of it. From hence was he habitually holy, and from hence did he exercise holiness entirely and universally in all things. [*Works*, III, pp. 170-171]

But besides this personal progress, there is another aspect of Christ's life in which the presence of the Spirit is manifested:

(ii) *In Jesus' exercise of the gifts of the Spirit.* In the hidden years of his life, Jesus 'grew... strong' in the power of the Spirit [*Lk.* 2:40]. What was distinctive for Owen about his later baptism was that there, in the fulness of his years, he received the fulness of the Spirit's anointing for public Messianic ministry.

Owen, however, notes that the significance of Jesus' baptism and anointing with the Spirit cannot be separated from his experience of temptation or from the 'driving' of the Spirit, by which he was thrust into the wilderness [*Mk.* 1:12]. The same expression [*ekballein*] is used of both the Saviour being driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, and the disciples being driven out into the harvest by the Lord of the Harvest [*Lk.* 10:2]. In both cases the function of the Spirit's ministry is the advance of the kingdom of God and the defeat of the powers of darkness. The sword of the Spirit is a weapon tested and tried by our Lord so that his disciples may use it with confidence; the armour the disciple is to take is the armour which the Spirit forged for Christ in his ministry. The controlling thought here, for Owen, is that the ministry of the Spirit in the ministry of Christ is the paradigm for the ministry of the Spirit in the ministry of his disciples.

Owen further underlines a point he has already made: when Jesus returned in triumph from his testing and preached in the synagogue in *Luke 4*, he did not speak as a retired military colonel, barking out orders to subordinates (if the analogy may be used). What shone through the Spirit's presence in our Lord's exercise of spiritual gifts, as Luke notes, was his gracious humanity, and especially his gracious words [*Lk. 4:22*]. Here, again, Owen sees Scripture emphasising that the chief evidence of the power of the Spirit in ministry is true and holy humanity.

This brings us to the third aspect which Owen underlines:

3. The Ministry Of The Spirit In The Atonement Of Christ

Here the key text is *Hebrews 9:13-14*. Christ, by contrast with the Old Testament ritual sacrifices of dumb beasts, offered himself as a sacrifice to cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death. This he did 'through the eternal Spirit'.

Owen saw two possible ways of understanding these words: (a) the reference might be to the personal spirit of Jesus; (b) alternatively, it could refer to the Holy Spirit. In that case, the text expresses two things:

(i) An implicit contrast between the sacrifice of Christ and those of the Old Testament. The sacrifice of Christ was made not on the altar of the temple, but on the altar of the Spirit. Whereas an earthly altar could bear the weight of animal sacrifices, only an eternal altar could support the weight of Christ's sacrifice. Again, while fire consumed the whole burnt offering in the Old Testament, it was zeal for the glory of God, kindled by the Spirit, which consumed Christ [*cf. Jn. 2:17*].

(ii) But secondly, these words imply the nature of the Spirit's ministry in the sacrifice of Christ.

(a) The Spirit supported him in his decision to give himself without reserve to the Father's will. Our Lord thus devoted himself to his Father throughout the whole course of his life, in order to offer himself consummately on the Cross. He did this by his constant dependence on the Spirit.

(b) The Spirit supported Jesus as he came to the door of the temple, in the Garden of Gethsemane and there caught a glimpse of the bloody altar that awaited him.

(c) The Spirit also sustained him in the breaking of his heart and the engulfing of his soul with sorrow as he contemplated his coming sense of dereliction at Calvary, and then experienced what he had contemplated.

But Owen adds a final, moving touch. On the Cross, Jesus committed his spirit into the hands of his God and Father [*Lk.* 23:46]. But, what of his body? Externally, it was guarded by the angels who mounted watch over the tomb. Internally, it was preserved from corruption by the Holy Spirit [*Acts* 2:27]. And so, from first to last, the Spirit is the companion of Jesus' life and the support of his ministry. By his agency, the Holy One was conceived in the darkness of the Virgin's womb. By his presence, the Holy One was preserved in the darkness of Joseph's tomb.

From womb to tomb, the devotion of the eternal Spirit to the eternal Son in the flesh was abundantly evident.

This brings us to the fourth element:

4. The Ministry Of The Spirit In The Exaltation Of Christ

Here again, the principle of the unity of the work of Father, Son and Spirit is illustrated. The Father raised the Son [*Gal.* 1:1]; the Son took up his life again, having laid it down [*Jn.* 2:19; 10:38]. But Owen notes that there is also a strand of teaching in the New Testament which underlines the role of the Spirit in the resurrection: Christ was declared Son of God in power by the resurrection through the Spirit of holiness [*Rom.* 1:4]; he was justified by the Spirit in the resurrection [1 *Tim.* 3:16]. Nor was this merely a work of resuscitation. Christ's resurrection by the Spirit was his transformation. Indeed, it is his glorification [1 *Cor.* 15:43a; 45-9]. Thus, says Owen, 'he who first made his nature holy, now made it glorious' [*Works* III, p. 183]. The Spirit's ministry in the life of Jesus, therefore, was not merely from womb to tomb: it was from womb to throne.

There is something both profoundly moving and exhilarating about these emphases in Owen's teaching on the Spirit. But what is the practical and experimental value of his biblical insight?

It should be immediately evident that Owen's teaching on the Spirit corresponds to the basic law of the Spirit's ministry given in *John* 16:13-14. The Spirit can be known only in connection with Christ. He glorifies Christ, not himself. In Reformed exposition of the ministry of the Spirit we are accustomed to

this emphasis. But Owen's teaching challenges us to take this with the seriousness it deserves. For notice what his study of the Spirit in the life of Christ implies:

1. *The source of the Spirit's ministry to us is Jesus Christ.* Our Lord Jesus Christ became the Bearer of the Spirit, in order to be the Bestower of the Spirit (cf. *Jn.* 14:17: 'He [the Spirit] dwells with you [i.e. by his presence in Christ who is with them] and will be in you [i.e. when he was sent at Pentecost to indwell them as the Spirit of the ascended Lord]). That is why, in the New Testament, Pentecost is not seen as a separate event from Calvary and the Resurrection. Rather, it is the public manifestation of their significance: Jesus has received and borne the Spirit for his people. Now, the last monumental act takes place—overwhelming and epoch-making in its significance (as the first disciples realised): Jesus gives his own Spirit to his own people (cf. *Jn.* 14:18)!

2. *The pattern of the Spirit's ministry in us is Jesus Christ.* Perhaps the simplest way to expand Owen's insight is to say: the Spirit was in Christ in order to create the master copy of the life-style he would reproduce in all those who belong to Christ. Nothing is more central to the Reformed understanding of the ministry of the Spirit than this union to Christ which produces conformity to him. It is by the Spirit that we are being changed from one degree of glory to another [2 Cor. 3:18].

3. *The means of (one might even say the equipment for) the Spirit's ministry in us is the work of Christ.* He was the life-long companion of our Lord Jesus Christ. As such, he now takes what is Christ's and brings it to us [*Jn.* 16:14]. He is truly 'another Counsellor' [i.e. another of the same kind as Jesus himself had been to the disciples] [*Jn.* 14:16]. What he brings to us is nothing less than all that Jesus himself is to us. Owen clearly understood the significance of Jesus' words that it was to the advantage of the disciples that he should leave them [*Jn.* 16:7]. The only conceivable logic which can sustain such a statement is this: the Spirit who was in and on our Lord now lives in and on our lives, bringing to us all that Christ was and is for us.

4. *The goal of the Spirit's ministry in us is faith in Christ and glorifying of him.* One of the impressive consequences of reading Owen's study of the Spirit in the ministry of Jesus is that we inevitably begin to rejoice in knowing the Spirit. Yet, even in this, the Spirit does not transgress the principles which he equipped Christ to utter and the apostles to record in Scripture. For our new joy in the Spirit goes hand in hand with a new admiration of the Son, and a new desire to glorify him through the Spirit. The Spirit is Christ's witness. We likewise are to bear witness to Christ through the Spirit [*Jn.* 15:26-7]. His desire is that we should love

and admire the Incarnate and Ascended Lord, just as he himself does—eternally. This ‘Christ-full’ character of Owen’s teaching on the Spirit seals it with the marks of biblical authenticity.

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