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# The Spirit in the Word – and beyond?

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The relationship between the Bible and the Holy Spirit has been a major issue in the Christian church for centuries – one only has to think of the Puritan period, or the struggles of Martin Luther with the Anabaptists. At the present time, as our culture becomes ever more subjectivist, intellectual thought about objective truth is increasingly despised. In the first part of this article I would like to indicate, with massive help from the 17th century theologian John Owen, the close relationship between the Spirit and the word in one particular way – what JI Packer has called “the external witness of the Spirit” in and by the word.<sup>1</sup> After that, I will issue a warning against merging or in any way identifying the Spirit and the word.

## The Spirit in the word, according to John Owen

In Owen’s fascinating but more than ordinarily obscure treatise, *The reason of faith* (in vol.4 of the Goold-BOT edition of Owen’s works), his main subject is not *why* we believe but *why we should* believe; not what actually *causes* us to believe but what *warrants* us to. In his teaching he substantially agrees with Calvin, who deals with these subjects especially in his *Institutes*, book 1, chs. 7 and 8; but he goes a little beyond him, clarifying one aspect of the Spirit’s work that Calvin only pointed towards.

1. Owen goes along with the teaching of Calvin about the inner witness of the Spirit: we believe (not with a probable faith, not with a 51% confidence that on balance this is right) because God opens our eyes to see the manifest truth. His light is coming towards us from creation, from conscience and supremely from his word, but we are by nature blind because of sin. In grace he opens the eyes of our understanding: “Then he [the Lord] opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures”, Luke 24:45 (NIV). Owen comments on p. 57 of Vol. 4: “The work of the Holy Ghost unto this purpose consists in the saving *illumination* of the mind; and the effect of it is a *supernatural light*, whereby the mind is renewed: see Rom 12:2; Eph 1:18,19; 3:16-19”. It is called a “heart to understand, eyes to see, ears to hear,” Deut 29:4; the “opening of the eyes of our understanding,” Eph 1:18; the “giving of an understanding,” 1 Jn 5:20. Hereby we are enabled to discern the evidences of the divine original and authority of the Scripture that are in itself, as well as assent unto the truth contained in it; and without it we cannot do so, for “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned,” 1 Cor 2:14; and unto this end it is written in the prophets that “we shall be all taught of God,” Jn 6:45. This inner witness is *in* us, not in the Bible or in the preaching. Calvin likewise talks about the need for the Spirit to seal the truth in our hearts by his inward witness, and says that the same Spirit who spoke through the prophets must penetrate into our hearts.<sup>2</sup>

2. However, the central matter in Owen’s treatise is “the external work of the same Holy Spirit, giving evidence in and by the Scriptures unto its own Divine original”.<sup>3</sup>

The inner work of the Spirit simply enables us to respond to his external work or speaking – just as eyesight enables us to see light that is there; without objective light even the best eyesight would produce no sight. Owen is saying that we should believe the Bible because it is the Spirit speaking in a way that makes it *obvious* that it is *God* speaking in a self-authenticating manner. So there is a corresponding truth to that of the *inner* witness of the Spirit: his *external* witness. The former could be misunderstood as subjectivism or mysticism: “I believe the Bible because God has personally told me it is true.” It is not as purely private as that implies; we say instead – if we agree with Owen – that we believe the Bible because it is manifestly God speaking; and we humbly thank him for enabling us to recognise his voice.

Owen sets out this teaching particularly in chs 5 and 6 of his treatise. On p. 70 he says, “We believe the Scripture to be the word of God with divine faith for its own sake only; or, our faith is resolved into the authority and truth of God only as revealing himself unto us therein and thereby. And this authority and veracity of God do infallibly manifest or evince themselves unto our faith, or our minds in the exercise of it, by the revelation itself in the Scripture, and no otherwise; or, “Thus saith the LORD,” is the reason why we ought to believe, and why we do so, why we believe at all in general, and why we believe any thing in particular. And this we call the formal object or reason of faith.” So the warrant for believing is that this is what God says! Owen then deals with the details under two headings but I think it is clearer to do so under 3.

a) The Bible is God speaking. 2 Tim 3:16 of course in effect asserts this by saying that all Scripture is God-breathed – his word from his mouth. The external witness of the Spirit means that what the Spirit is saying now to us, to the world and to the churches is the words and message of Scripture.

b) Scripture manifests itself to be God speaking. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path,” Ps 119:105 – you do not need another light or an argument to show you a light! It is its own light – this is also the point in R L Dabney’s article *The Bible its own witness*.<sup>4</sup> Owen says (p. 74) that this is the reason why God requires faith and obedience from the whole of Israel in future generations just when they hear his law being read out, Deut 31:11-13. It must be that Scripture shows itself to be God speaking, otherwise such immediate faith and obedience would not be demanded. The same of course applies in the case of Luke 16:27-31: if they do not believe Moses and the prophets, the problem is in them, in their unbelief, not in any lack of evidence. The word carries its own evidence. “Now, this could not be spoken if the Scripture did not contain in itself the whole entire formal reason of believing; for if it has not this, something necessary unto believing would be wanting, though that [a confirming miracle] were enjoyed.”<sup>5</sup>

c) And *how* does Scripture evidence itself to be God’s word? What is the *nature* of this external witness of the Spirit? Basically two things: its own light shining, and then its effects. On the former, 2 Pet 1:19 and 2 Cor 4:4 can be mentioned in addition to the verse in Ps 119. But in particular Jer 23:28-29 is interesting: false prophecy is like straw and chaff, but God’s word is grain. “What has straw to do with grain?” (v. 28). They are different in their nature, and obviously so. This is the point that it would seem to me W Gould, the 19th century editor of Owen, failed to see, as revealed in his comments at the start of the treatise in the BOT edition: “The grounds on which it [Scripture] is

thus to be received resolve themselves into what is now known by the designation of the experimental evidence in favour of Christianity, – the renewing and sanctifying effect of divine truth on the mind” (in *Prefatory note*). These are the *effects* of Scripture, which is part of what Owen is saying, but it is not the whole of it. There is this sight of the objective, self-evidencing light of Scripture as God’s word. Give me Calvin rather than Goold! He says that Scripture gives as good evidence of its truth as black and white things do of their colour, and bitter and sweet things do of their taste.<sup>6</sup> We are rendered as sure of Scripture’s divine origin as if we beheld God’s image visibly stamped on it.<sup>7</sup>

3. Now this does not mean that apologetics has no place. Indeed in ch. 4 of his treatise Owen gives about the clearest and best summary of the purpose, place, and nature of apologetics I have ever come across. He says that apologetics does not create faith but is very useful rubbish clearance, because the reason people do not believe is not only original sin but also prejudices stemming from “traditions, education and people’s converse in the world.” Apologetics can help in undermining people’s faith in some of these roadblocks that Satan has put in the way of them even considering the gospel. In a subsidiary way apologetics also helps in confirming the faith of believers when stupid things are said against the truth.

4. This central point (that the Bible is, manifestly, the Spirit speaking) delivers us from the element of uncertainty that attends even the finest apologetics. Ultimately we believe not because of *any* argument *about* the Bible, but rather because of God acting in the world, speaking, and enabling us to hear him. It delivers us from the subjectivism of only believing in the inner witness of the Spirit. And it delivers us too from that formalistic view of Scripture that focuses on its inerrancy, as if the Scripture is a book originally from God which he sometimes uses, when the Spirit chooses to. I call that a low and dead view of Scripture because if Owen is right and the Bible is God’s word, then the Bible is God speaking *now*: whenever it is read or heard or its teaching is being communicated, to some extent at least God himself, the Spirit himself is directly involved and is speaking. We have got so accustomed in evangelicalism to calling the Bible “God’s word” that we seem to have forgotten what that means: here God is speaking. This of course must be the reason why Jesus uttered those words in Jn 6:63: “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” Even Rom 1:16, “the gospel is the power of God for salvation”, is easier to understand in the light of Owen’s point about the external witness of the Spirit. Likewise with Heb 4:12. Packer makes something explicit that I believe is only implicit in Owen when he says, “Scripture through the covenanted action of the Holy Spirit, constantly ‘shines’...”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the Spirit has covenanted faithfully to speak, to be involved, whenever the Scripture or its message is entering the minds of men.

The Puritans – certainly Owen and William Bridge – held that not only is the Bible itself God’s word, but anything else, especially a sermon, that communicates the truth of the Bible is. More importantly, the Bible sanctions their view in 1 Pet 4:11! It is as though the Bible is like undiluted squash in a bottle, preaching is with water added, for ordinary consumption. Owen says, “...whatever by just consequence is drawn from the Word of God, is itself also the Word of God, and truth infallible. And to deprive the church of this liberty in the interpretation of the Word, is to deprive it of the chiefest benefit intended by it. This is that on which the whole ordinance of preaching is founded;

which makes that which is derived out of the Word to have the power, authority, and efficacy of the Word accompanying it. Thus, though it be the proper work and effect of the Word of God to quicken, regenerate, sanctify and purify the elect, – and the Word primarily and directly is only that which is written in the Scriptures, – yet we find all these effects produced in and by the preaching of the Word, when perhaps not one sentence of the Scripture is *verbatim* repeated. And the reason hereof is, because whatsoever is directly deduced and delivered according to the mind and appointment of God from the Word is the Word of God, and hath the power, authority, and efficacy of the Word accompanying it.”<sup>9</sup>

A further consequence of this high, dynamic view of Scripture as the voice of God today is that we are assured that Spurgeon was right when he said that he would rather defend a lion than the Bible. We should just let the lion out of the cage. This is a wonderful incentive for proclamation in preaching, i.e. preaching that is *not* just explaining what the text says and showing people how to apply it to their lives, and hoping they will believe it and sometimes giving some reasons why they really ought to believe it. Preaching is centrally an authoritative declaring of the word of God in his name, done by an ambassador of Christ. And the very message we convey shows it is God who is speaking. So speak, don't be ashamed, shine God's light.

Furthermore, if we write articles and commentaries we ought to make it plain, not only in some other book we have written or in a lecture we gave at the South Pole, that we believe the Bible anyway because it is God's word. Otherwise, even if our conclusions are evangelical, our method of argument and of communication with the reader is dishonouring to the Holy Spirit; it is unbelieving, rationalistic. The next step down from reaching Christian conclusions by rationalistic means is to reach some rationalistic conclusions. I confess to shuddering sometimes at the method of argument in some helpful evangelical writing. It is like watching an escapologist: how *will* he get out of this straightjacket of humanistic assumptions and come up with an orthodox answer? But often, lo and behold, he does – after all, the book is *published* by evangelicals!

5. Two obvious questions arise from such teaching. First, what about 1 Thess 1:5 “...our gospel came to you not simply with words, but ...with the Holy Spirit”? Isn't that implying that we can have the word *only*, without the Spirit's involvement at all? No, I believe that is reading too much into Paul. If it is God's word that is going forth, then the Spirit *is* speaking. Paul must be envisaging some situations in which those preaching the word know so little help that nobody unsaved is paying any attention – in that case the Spirit is not speaking to the unconverted; or he may have in mind times when none of those hearing the word are given the Spirit's enlightenment, he is not working *in* them, with his inner witness. But to draw from 1 Thess 1 the idea that people can be hearing Scripture preached and the Spirit is not speaking at all is to build far too much on a statement of Scripture only about what is *not* the case.

The second question that arises is “Do we need the Spirit, if the word is always God speaking? Do we need to pray earnestly for his outpouring on gospel work?” Emphatically “Yes”, because how clearly and powerfully the message is put across depends on the Spirit's help given to the preacher. How many people pay attention to the message depends on his work in the situation and in them. Whether people

understand and respond to the message they have heard depends on the Spirit's work in them – the inner witness again.

## **The Spirit beyond the word?**

Now that we have seen the Spirit's involvement with the word, to give us a dynamic view of Scripture, it is necessary to dissuade Christians from merging the Spirit into the word or from being people more of the word than of the Spirit. Rom 7:6 says "...by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the letter."(NIV)

1. The Spirit is needed in the hearers as well as in the word. The Lord opened Lydia's heart in Acts 16: it was not enough to hear Paul preach, however much the Spirit may have been with him. This highlights the need of the Spirit's free, sovereign inner witness, already mentioned.

2. When the Spirit works in us, he works – as some of our forefathers put it – not just through the word but *with* the word, i.e. he himself works directly in the heart. It is not just the word that actually "touches" our souls, but God does so, immediately. As Charles Hodge puts it in his *Systematic Theology*, "...the truth (in the case of adults) attends the work of regeneration, but is not the means by which it is effected... Men see by the light, without light vision is impossible. Yet the eyes of the blind are not opened by means of the light. In like manner all the states and acts of consciousness preceding or attending, or following regeneration, are by the truth; but regeneration itself, or the imparting spiritual life, is by the immediate agency of the Spirit".<sup>10</sup> Jn 3:1-8 and Eph 1:17-19 show that he must be right. This is one note that I was sorry to miss in Sinclair Ferguson's generally superb recent book on the Holy Spirit. I felt I saw Pelagius' shadow flitting across the background of his chapter on the new birth.

3. Does the Spirit work without the word, without using the Scripture or teaching derived from it? Well, Scripture itself says that God speaks through creation, in Ps 19 and Rom 1:19ff. Furthermore it is obvious that an event such as the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD must have shed a lot of light on the passages in the gospels that predicted that dire event. God showed people, in his providence, what the Bible meant. And if creation and providence shed light for us upon God, upon his dealings with us, the meaning of Scripture, and his will, why should his gracious actings *by the Spirit* in our lives not reveal something to us about him and his ways? Even BB Warfield, interestingly, was prepared to see the sources of theology as being not Scripture alone, but "...we accept all these sources of knowledge of God – nature, providence, Christian experience – as true and valid sources, the well-authenticated data yielded by these are to be received by us as revelations of God, and as such to be placed alongside of the revelations in the written Word and wrought with them into one system".<sup>11</sup>

So revelation is bigger than Scripture, even if Scripture has a unique, authoritative role as defining what is true revelation; and the work of the Spirit, including his revealing work, is not exclusively through the word. Whether the Spirit nowadays gives what Scripture calls "prophecies", regularly or even occasionally, is another question, albeit an interesting and important one, upon which I had better not enter now.

4. Lastly, and most importantly, we must acknowledge that the Spirit is not the word, and the Spirit is God and the word is not; and therefore the Spirit, the living God

himself, must occupy that place of supremacy and centrality in our lives that even his holy word does not. Let no evangelical accustomed to calling Scripture “the word” be misled thereby into thinking that Jn 1:1-2 is in any way telling us that the Bible is God or we can treat it as if it is God! There is such a thing as bibliolatry, and the more we get terrified by various forms of mysticism, the more we are likely to fall into it. I come back to Rom 7:6 again: surely it is saying something about relating to the living God, not just to his word, and also about treating his word not mainly as a book of rules about what to believe, what to do and what not to do, but as a revelation of his powerful, active, supernatural grace. Warfield describes what happened among the Jews in the period between the Testaments as the development or slide that led eventually to the Pharisees: “...the idea of law more and more absorbed the whole sphere of religious thought, and piety came to be conceived more and more as right conduct before God instead of living communion with God”.<sup>12</sup>

“The Bible and the Bible only is the religion of Protestants” said William Chillingworth. In the sphere of authoritative, infallible revelation he was right. Indeed the Bible is more than infallible, inerrant, and a test of everything that claims to be revelatory: it is God speaking, in a living, dynamic, positive, edifying and powerful way. But understood in any other sense, the statement is wrong – this may have something to do with the fact that Chillingworth was one of Laud’s Oxford informers, and had converted to and then back from Roman Catholicism! It would be nearer the mark to say “the Spirit alone, and communion with the living God in him, is the religion of Protestants”. I am therefore suggesting that if we want a controlling model of what the Christian life is all about, it is to be found not in following the Bible, being biblical, right belief, or right conduct, but in communion with God, in the wide sense that includes but is not restricted to the felt fellowship of the heart with him. And I trust that a reading of John’s gospel and his letters would prove me right.

## References

<sup>1</sup> JI Packer, *Among God’s Giants*, 1991, p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.7.4.

<sup>3</sup> *op.cit.* p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> RL Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, repr. 1982, vol 1, pp. 115ff

<sup>5</sup> *op. cit.* p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> *op. cit.* 1.7.2.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* 1.7.5.

<sup>8</sup> *op. cit.* p. 119.

<sup>9</sup> J Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Goold, repr. 1990, vol 3, p. 147.

<sup>10</sup> in part 3 (not vol 3), ch. 14, sec. 4.

<sup>11</sup> BB Warfield, *Studies in Theology*, 1932, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> BB Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, 1929, p. 28.

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