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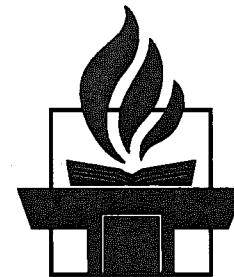
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Reformation  
& Revival



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The *doctrine of grace* permeated Puritan thinking in many areas, from salvation to material prosperity. At the heart of Puritanism was the belief that God's grace is the source of all human benefit and that it cannot be earned by human merit.

*Leland Ryken*

Puritanism began with this concern about a thorough Reformation, and that led on to a whole doctrine of the church; and while we thank God for other aspects of Puritanism, for those things that became a part of their great corpus of teaching, if we fail to put the doctrine of the church in a central position we are departing from the true Puritan attitude, the Puritan outlook, the Puritan spirit, and the Puritan understanding.

*D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones*

## *Liturgy Lessons from Owen*

Douglas Jones

Only Americans could so deftly separate joy from solemnity. Perhaps it is our deep prohibitionist streak. We tend to think that joy has to be rather chaotic and unbounded, like a fraternity party, and that it loses its heart when structured in any way. In our opposition to solemn rituals, we are quite lonely in the history of the world and the church. Our Christian worship often follows in this American trench: some insist that it must be spontaneous and unbounded, and others insist on funereal solemnity.

But why must joy be unstructured? Scripture certainly does not divide joy and solemnity in the way moderns do. In Scripture, worship is compared to a wonderful ritual of joy and solemnity: a wedding, a marriage feast. The interesting mixture of hope, tension, peace, and righteousness presented in a wedding rite make cold indifference very difficult. And a wedding's awe and solemnity would make aisle-rolling, shouting, and hand-waving appear arrogantly self-centered. If modern evangelicals clung to the biblical image of worship as a wedding, then we would not bristle so much at older liturgical forms. Like weddings, worship can be both solemn and deeply joyous.

Puritans, like John Owen, highlight such points. In particular, his essay, "A Discourse Concerning Liturgies and Their Imposition,"<sup>1</sup> provides an interesting contrast for us, not so much in what it condemns, but for what it assumes. The early Protestants were a deeply joyful lot, and yet most modern evangelicals would be appalled to sit through one of those early services. Even many of us who appreciate Puritan and Reformed teaching would get a little uneasy during parts of their worship. Most would probably view them as dreary and overly formal, let alone know what to do with ministerial absolutions and set prayers so encouraged by Calvin and friends. But we should remember that rowdies stepping out of Mardi Gras would also be impatient

with the simple beauty of a wedding. The Reformers were well aware of what they were doing, especially in regard to worship, but they were not as antihistorical and antiritual as we modern Americans are.

Owen wrote the above essay in early 1662, during the ongoing, heated ecclesiastical negotiations between the Puritan Nonconformists, primarily Presbyterians, and the court bishops of the recently restored Charles II. The king had been returned to the throne partly through the efforts of the Presbyterians, and so though he despised their faith, he could not jettison Presbyterian concerns too high handedly. He needed to make some show of attempted compromise before finally ejecting the Presbyterians from their positions, which he finally did in August 1662 by means of the Act of Uniformity.

John Owen was not part of these “negotiations” over the liturgy and prayer book, being an independent, but he wrote in support of those Presbyterians, like Richard Baxter, who were chosen to bring forward their recommended changes first in the *Book of Common Prayer* and then in the English liturgy.

The main plea by the Presbyterian negotiators and in Owen’s essay is against a state imposed liturgy. They chose not so much to directly attack the renewed Erastianism but instead focused on biblical appeals for tolerance on liturgical matters, even at times locating themselves for the sake of argument in the position of weaker brothers of Romans 14 in their appeal for tolerance and freedom in worship. Though these Puritans sought to remove the king’s finger from the liturgy, they were not seeking an unbounded freedom from a prescribed liturgy, and it is in this sort of margin in Owen’s essay that modern evangelicals can gain some insight.

In outline, his essay begins with a discussion of the burdens of the Old Covenant and the freedoms granted to us

under Christ. He then turns historical and argues that neither the apostles nor the early church for the first three centuries used fully prescribed liturgies. Finally, he turns to two arguments against imposed liturgies, the first an inference from the Puritan regulative principle (whatever is not commanded is forbidden) and the second an appeal to the right of free exercise of pastoral gifts. All this may sound rather mundane to Protestant ears, but Owen’s qualifications of these points are telling. From Owen’s essay, we can draw four observations, the final from a misstep by Owen. None of the following should be taken as automatic endorsement of any worship practice, but only as food for thought as we moderns continue to think about these things.

1) *Directive Liturgy*. Every church has a liturgy in the most generic sense, that is, some order of worship. Owen, though, is focusing on the notion of liturgy which prescribes or directs set prayers and rituals in a prescribed order. Modern evangelicals have quite a problem with such arrangements, since it sounds so Roman Catholic, but Owen is quite unconcerned about that. He explains,

Nor . . . do I oppose the directive part of this liturgy as to the reading of the Scripture, when it requires that which is Scripture to be read, the administration of the ordinances by Christ appointed, nor the composition of forms of prayer suited to the nature of the institutions to which they relate. . . .<sup>2</sup>

At another point, he adds,

They who are willing to take it upon their consciences that the best way to serve God in the church, or the best ability that they have for the discharge of their duty therein, consists in the reading of such a book [e.g., of liturgy], shall not

by me be opposed in their way and practice. It is only about its imposition . . . that we discourse.<sup>3</sup>

And Owen was far from alone in these sentiments. Prescribed prayers were part of many of the Reformers' liturgies, and even those Presbyterians he was supporting had a stronger attachment to prescribed prayers than Owen. Some of the Presbyterians suggested only minor amendments of the *Book of Common Prayer*, and Richard Baxter wrote an entire prescribed liturgy made up of numerous, very lengthy, set prayers.

2) *Uniformity in Worship*. In our individualism, we show little if any concern for national or even denominational uniformity in worship. Every congregation follows its own path, which varies from week to week. I am not here arguing against this, but highlighting it to show how our modernity has changed us from our Protestant forefathers. Even the most Nonconformist among them were Nonconformists in regard to the state having any say in liturgy. But they were quite interested in a uniformity in worship which had been a characteristic of Christendom from its inception. Again Owen,

It will not, I suppose, be denied that the apostles took care for the unity of the churches, and for that uniformity in the worship of God which is acceptable unto him. Evidence lies so full unto it in their writings that it cannot be denied. Great weight everywhere they lay upon this duty of the churches, and propose unto them the ways whereby it may be done, with multiplied commands and exhortations to attend unto them.<sup>4</sup>

Our modern democratism demands a pluralism in worship as never before witnessed in the history of the church. And our entertainment habits demand more variety within

our variety. Whether right or wrong, we have without thought abandoned any sense of the church standing in opposition to modern individualism and have just let the church reflect that individualism.

3) *God-Centered Worship*. The Puritans are most notable for their opposition to man-made worship and their devotion to worshipping in the manner prescribed by God. Many contemporary Reformed congregations still hold to this priority in their worship, but the vast majority of evangelicalism would be taken up short if asked to worship in the way instituted by God. We would not know how to process such a God-centeredness. Owen tells us,

The arbitrary invention of any thing, with commands for its necessary and indispensable use in the worship of God, as a part of that worship, and the use of any thing so invented and so commanded in that worship, is unlawful and contrary to the rule of the word.<sup>5</sup>

This is quite a standard statement of the regulative principle of worship. However even the Reformed may disagree about applying the regulative principle, all agree that the principle forces a concern first and foremost for what God, not man, finds important in worship.<sup>6</sup> Worship for the Puritan was not something intended to satisfy seekers; it was intended as a way of satisfying God, a "pleasant aroma" to God.

Even among today's Reformed brethren who embrace some form of the regulative principle, we still hear people complaining about how a particular church's worship fails to make them feel good or warm them. Owen and the early Protestants would be quite perplexed and probably appalled at such an attitude. Christian worship is not performed for the benefit of the congregants! We ought not to go to church for our own needs, real as those are. Our pri-

mary purpose is to go to honor Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, who alone deserve it. But we are so self-centered that we think worship is primarily for us. We say we don't like the songs or prayers or preaching, but that is like a king's tailor complaining that the king's clothes do not fit the tailor! "But they are not for you anyway," we should say. What an odd thing to complain about. How backwards we have it. We are to sing and preach and feast for the king's benefit, not our own, though that benefit will easily bless us too when we have our priorities in line.

This point is particularly telling for those former Protestants who have become entranced by the aesthetic temptations of Roman and Eastern Catholicisms. So often, in these conversion accounts, we hear how Roman liturgy satisfied the deepest needs of the converts, how its beauty overwhelmed them. But they are being quite modern and individualistic when they say that sort of thing. They too are placing man before God in worship. This does not mean that our liturgies have to be ugly. Far from it. They are to be beautiful for God first, though, not us.

4) *Historical Missteps*. Owen spends much time trying to debunk the claims of liturgical antiquity offered by Rome and the Church of England. At the same time, he, like most of the Reformers and even the Anabaptists, appealed to the purity of the early church. "Our first inquiry shall be into the three first centuries, wherein, confessedly, the streams of the gospel institutions did run more clear and pure from human mixtures than in those following. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

This debunking and praising of history now raises an interesting problem. We now know much more about the history of the ancient liturgies, and it appears that defenders of the antiquity of Christendom's prescribed liturgies are more in the right. A wealth of research in this century has gone to show a very interesting and in many ways uniform and prescribed liturgy going back virtually right into

the apostles' hands.

That may not mean that such liturgies are authoritative and binding upon us, but it does mean that those Protestants who make the appeal to a primitive purity will find prescribed liturgies at almost every turn. Similarly, our greater insight into the synagogue has revealed the prescribed and regularly repeated prayers probably used by Christ Himself in the synagogue.<sup>8</sup> If our century's liturgical research is correct, then the more primitive is not Anabaptistic austerity but a more prescribed liturgy.

All of the above fits very nicely into the biblical image of worship as a wedding. Like Owen on worship, weddings are very joyful occasions, even though they include many prescribed forms and are quite uniform in practice. Those things help us to recognize the universal message of that ritual, and they help us enjoy it. But that enjoyment, as congregational participant/witness or as the bride, ought not to be self-centered. In the case of the church especially, our groom has transformed us from helpless and undeserving wretches (Ezek. 16) and forsaken widows (Isa. 54:3-8) into glorious brides (Rev. 21). What joyful solemnity!

#### Endnotes

- 1 John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1990 [1850]) xv, 3.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 33-34.
- 6 In his opposition to some prescribed liturgies, Owen goes beyond the mainstream, such as found in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, in his appeal to a stricter form of the regulative principle. Instead of allowing the standard distinction between required ele-

ments and nonrequired circumstances, Owen appears to argue that both must be prescribed by God. The standard distinction would permit even the most ancient of liturgies, but Owen's take on the regulative principle makes any kind of worship virtually impossible.

- 7 Ibid., 21.
- 8 Christ's opposition to lengthy, repetitious prayers is not evidently directed at the regular, short prayers which formed the typical synagogue service but the "impromptu" prayer time allowed in various parts of the liturgy in which Pharisaical types would self-centeredly live out their maxim, "Prolix prayer prolongs life."

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**Author**

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