

GATISS AMISS: Owen at Oxford

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The quatercentenary of the eminent puritan divine Dr John Owen (1616-83) has occasioned the newly-formed John Owen Society at Oxford. Held at the university church of St Mary's on 25 January 2016, the guest speaker at the society's inaugural meeting was the Revd Dr Lee Gatiss, Director of the Anglican Church Society.

My first encounter with Dr Gatiss followed his appearance at the 2012 Westminster Conference, where he gave the opening paper. The conference theme being the Great Ejection of 1662, Dr Gatiss - while lamenting the treatment of the Puritans - made some highly-dubious statements from his unashamed Anglican perspective. After communicating some objections, I received a rather odd reply consisting of a bulging package of two of the author's books. The unusual 'bulge' was due to a chocolate toffee to which was attached a note 'something to chew on'. So, instead of responding to my points, this was the jesting author's way of laughing off my criticisms. I smiled, but was left totally unimpressed. I was dealing with a clown, and not a scholar.

True to form, Dr Gatiss addressed the JOS on 'The English Calvin? The Life and Legacy of John Owen'. What a performance! Indeed, in all my years of listening to conference papers and academic lectures, never did I feel so 'underwhelmed' if not irritated as on this occasion. The speaker started with a distasteful joke about the Oxford martyrs, some of whom, after studying at Cambridge (like Dr Gatiss), ended up being burned at Oxford. The speaker hoped he might avoid a similar fate!

After this clownish 'overture', we were presented with a bumptious and cocksure presentation consisting of facile claims, in a style lacking any sense of gravitas. While I would not deny that appropriate and substantial humour has a place, this sparkling effort from Church Society's 'star performer' was peppered with silly jokes, mostly at the expense of Nonconformists (the FIEC, Presbyterians and Baptists). The spell-bound audience of adoring fans responded to the amusement as only students reared in a superficial celebrity culture can.

Turning from 'style' to 'substance', the lecturer's material left much to be desired. Outlining Owen's life, we were told of his eminence as a preacher. Even this claim is doubtful. Once asked by the King why he listened to the uneducated tinker John Bunyan, Owen - much less of a preacher than a theological author - replied, "Could I possess the

tinker's abilities for preaching, please your majesty, I would gladly relinquish all my learning." Truly a humility to be admired and emulated. Omitting a detail like this did not inspire confidence in Dr Gatiss' scholarship. Such a detail, as well as encouraging the Baptists (!) would have helped us to warm to his subject. Sadly - even allowing for sparsely-available personal details (admitted by the speaker) - we were not presented with an attractive figure. In this respect, Richard Baxter always leaves one amazed and inspired. Instead, apart from jokes about Owen's box of pistols and his horse and carriage, we learned of his personal afflictions. The manner in which Dr Gatiss spoke of Owen's bereavements of his wife and their eleven children reached zero on the tear scale. With an equal degree of gravitas we were told that Owen often felt 'down' about the growth of Arminianism and Socinianism. Yet another silly joke popped up, as if being depressed about religious apostasy commanded no sympathy, especially today. (Dr Gatiss gave no hint of feeling 'down' about the current state of Anglicanism.) We were also informed of Owen's 'dry and barren spirit' and his resignation to the 'shades of the grave' with his approaching 'long drawn-out puritan death'. All this was stated in an inappropriate tone. An incomplete reference to Owen's death-bed assurance hardly relieved the prevailing negative impression.

The speaker managed to express some commendation for Owen's admirable application to his books - especially the seven-volume *Hebrews* commentary - as a valuable distraction from life's trials and tragedies (as well as from 'riot' and 'lust', yet another amusing aside for students). The brief bio-sketch rounded off with an observation that Owen was not always right, and often petulant. Dr Gatiss was also quick to distance himself from several of Owen's theological and political opinions.

Dr Gatiss then presented a 'five-point' (sic) assessment of John Owen.

First, he claimed that Owen was a 'great Christian statesman'. We were told of Owen's influence on the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, whose belief that he was being 'guided by God' effectively meant being 'guided by Owen'. Admitting that Owen could be a 'bit of a bully' hardly qualifies him as 'a great Christian statesman'. What we were *not* told was that Owen bullied Richard Cromwell into resigning as his father's successor after he wisely agreed to govern by consulting with parliament and the Presbyterians. It was however noted that after the Restoration, Owen - a keen advocate of toleration and a trenchant critic of Anglican 'episcopacy and ceremonies' - suffered little under Charles II. Again, Baxter is the inspiring hero of the period, although you'd never guess that from Dr Gatiss.

Second, it was affirmed that Owen was a fine scholar. This, of course,

would appeal to Oxford students, especially since Owen was a student at Queen's and later Dean of Christchurch during the Protectorate. If I may be permitted a joke of my own, our son Hywel studied for his D. Phil. at Christchurch. For a while, Hywel lived in the Deanery. I told him that if he was ever haunted by the spectre of Owen, he only had to say 'Baxter' ('Amyraut' will do just as well) to dispel it, even though Baxter - like Bunyan - never attended the university!

Of course, Owen's scholarly output is his chief and enduring claim to fame, especially among intellectuals and academics. We were informed that his works abound in references to classical authors. His grasp of Latin, Greek and Hebrew was total. He was especially conversant with the Jewish background in his monumental commentary on *Hebrews*. Otherwise hostile to all things puritanical, Anthony à Wood acknowledges all this in his history of Oxford University.

While Dr Gatiss' presentation of Owen's scholarly legacy doubtless went down well in Oxford, his PR campaign begs many questions at a time when clear gospel communication is a priority. Does Owen help us at this point? In his informative and challenging MTh thesis on Owen's use of Greek, P. Karageorgi raises important questions regarding the Puritan's scholarly erudition. Without calling into question the value and importance of the classical languages, Mr Karageorgi suggests that men of Owen's era had 'an unhealthy, unquestioning attachment to the classics', and that Owen had 'too high a regard for Aristotle'. He further asks, did Owen prefer classical Greek, using 'obscure words and neologisms to appear more erudite and respected?' In view of Owen's commendation of Bunyan cited above, was he admitting that 'Bunyan's simplicity reached more people with the gospel?' There can be no doubt that Owen's seeming obsession with antiquity adversely affected his English utterance, in the pulpit and in print. His heavy, elephantine style compared with Baxter's lucid and vibrant prose, is readily recognised by J. I. Packer. Indeed, while Owen's material needs 'translation' for modern eyes and ears, Baxter's originals remain lucid and lively. The point is that now as in every age, the church needs preachers like Bunyan and Baxter more than scholars like Owen. The books of these preachers (and Baxter was a match for Owen, and actually knew more than many a professor!) might be insufficiently respected at Oxford and elsewhere. However, puritan studies in ministerial training courses would prove beneficial in the church if not welcome in the academy if more attention was given to Bunyan and Baxter.

Third, we were reminded that Owen 'was a thorough-going Protestant'. He was utterly opposed to the 'Roman Antichrist'. So far, so good. That said, if Owen's scholarly prestige might endear him to today's academic fraternity, his protestant convictions would probably

cool their ardour rapidly. After all, ours is a 'PC' liberal-ecumenical age. Within the compromised culture of modern Anglicanism (within which Gatiss' Church Society seems content to function), where are the Anglicans who would loudly shout 'hurrah' over Owen's Protestantism? From allegedly-evangelical Archbishop Welby to the advocates of ecumenical Alpha and doubtless beyond, Owen would be regarded as an embarrassing relic from the past.

An astonishing example of the speaker's facile claims for Owen is that he was 'a firm Anglican'. A Puritan yes, but one who was committed to the Thirty-nine Articles. We were told that despite the infamous Act of Uniformity, Owen continued to affirm Anglican doctrine. However, the same could be said of every orthodox Puritan in the seventeenth century. They all rejoiced in the original Gospel affirmations of the Reformation. But Owen's puritan convictions took him way beyond the infrastructure of Anglicanism, which makes Gatiss' attempt to 're-Anglicanize' Owen look ridiculous. Indeed, were he around today, he would doubtless chastise Church Society and its adherents for remaining part of a body far more apostate than it was in Owen's day.

Gatiss is particularly amiss in claiming Owen's support for the Anglican doctrine of justification by faith alone. At the simplest level, this is incontestable. However, Owen's famous 1677 treatise on the subject reflects ultra-reformed and extra-biblical developments of a later exaggerated 'High Calvinism', associated more with Calvin's successor Theodore Beza than with Calvin. As I have demonstrated in my Oxford book *Atonement and Justification*, Owen *did* depart from the truth that justification consists only in the pardon of sin. He *did* depart from the reformation view that Christ's *passive* righteousness in suffering is alone imputed to the believer. Owen says that justification is *more* than mere pardon, and the imputation of Christ's *active* obedience to the Law of God is also necessary for the sinner's complete justification *coram deo*.

As Richard Baxter made abundantly clear, Owen's doctrine of two-fold imputation drove the drift towards antinomianism in the seventeenth century. Baxter exposed the incoherence of Owen's position. If this is correct, then, regarding Christ's 'doing', 'we could need no pardon, for he that is reputed to be innocent, by fulfilling all the law, is reputed never to have sinned...Therefore, such an imputation of Christ's righteousness to us would make his satisfaction null or vain'. In short, the logic of Owen's defective and contradictory view makes the cross unnecessary and even redundant! It affected the theological rhetoric: instead of focusing on 'the Cross', puritan hearers were called to trust in 'the righteousness of Christ' (an expression requiring careful handling). Furthermore, Baxter rightly complained that what is arguably *implicit* in Chapter XI of the *Westminster Confession* (1646)

was made *explicit* by Owen in the Congregationalists' *Savoy Declaration* (1658), a view later reflected in the *Baptist Confession* (1689). Such a shift had implications for a later antinomian hypercalvinism. Owen certainly went beyond the doctrine of the Continental and Anglican reformers. He was, in Baxter's view, the 'over-orthodox doctor'.

Dr Gatiss rounded off this survey of his subject's Protestantism by reminding the audience of his shifting churchmanship. We were told that this one-time Anglican exchanged an early Presbyterianism for Independency. Another joke: apologies to Presbyterians. However, we were *not* told that at the end of his life, Owen reverted to Presbyterianism. Lastly, we learned that Owen did not believe in church-state separation. True, the government of the day would have taken action against all kinds of heresy. Frustrated that restoration Anglicanism was more bothered about deviations in episcopal church discipline than doctrinal heresy, Owen would have a lot to say about today's lack of discipline of every kind. One wonders what Church Society is doing to correct the current mess. Is it challenging the *status quo*, or living out a cosy coexistence between easy-going evangelicalism and the other varieties of Anglican churchmanship.

Fourth, interspersed with yet more jokes ('argument weak, laugh here') we were reminded that John Owen was 'a solidly Reformed theologian', one who, after sixteen-hundred years of debate, was at one with the Councils, the early Fathers and the Anglican church. However, this is a question-begging claim if ever there was one, made by a 'semi-Reformed' Anglican about an 'ultra-Reformed' Puritan! To start with, what is 'solid Reformed theology'? After all, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, there were dubious developments. Indeed, there were four discernible periods:

First, the Reformation era itself, as expressed in the early reformed confessions and the writings of the first reformers. While divine predestination was affirmed according to God's *secret* will, His *revealed* will concerning the all-sufficient and universally-available death of Christ was given Gospel priority. The biblical balance of Deuteronomy 29: 29 was carefully maintained, especially by Calvin.

Second, in response to the Arminian threat, the Canons drawn up at the Synod of Dort represent a transitional balanced orthodoxy emphasising the atonement's universal sufficiency as well as its efficacy for the elect.

Third, the era of high-orthodoxy which found expression in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and its derivatives. The Westminster divines and John Owen deleted the dimension of a universal

sufficiency, a conviction that was important to earlier generations of Reformed theologians.

Fourth and last, the development process terminated with the dead-end of hypercalvinism. Limited atonement and a preoccupation with divine sovereignty ruled out any idea of 'free offers of grace'. In short, undeniable changes occurred between the time of John Calvin and the time of John Gill.

So, with specific reference to 'Calvinism', where does John Owen fit in? Before I answer this question, surely many would say that Owen's major treatise on limited atonement, the *Death of Death*, qualifies him as a 'solid Reformed theologian'. However, during the question session, Dr Gatiss suggested bizarrely - and 'nervously' - that one shouldn't start with the *Death of Death*. We were told that "Owen's is not the only view." Really? Many would surely feel short-changed with this odd opinion from one who argued for 'limited atonement' in *For Us and For Our Salvation* (2012)! After all, for Dr J. I. Packer and the Banner of Truth Trust, the 1959 republication of Owen's treatise was a defining moment in reaffirming the identity of Reformed theology. It was surely the 'last word' on the subject. This explains why Owen fits in with the third phase of development, which was at odds with the first two periods. Indeed, his doctrine of 'limited atonement' does not square with the views of Luther, or Calvin or the formularies of the Church of England - or with the Canons of Dort!

In order to avoid the perspicuous and embarrassing evidence of Calvin's teaching, Dr Gatiss resorted to marginalising Calvin, as if he was but one of several Reformed theologians. Such a ploy possesses no integrity whatever. Neither is it original. Significantly, in France Pierre du Moulin tried the same trick in his contest with Amyraut who claimed to perpetuate Calvin's views. Despite the attempt of scholars like Dr Richard Muller to close down the 'Calvin *versus* Calvinism' debate, the evidence for the shift away from John Calvin's conspicuous teaching remains too compelling to be ignored. It is a feature of Muller's dubious scholastic case to marginalise Calvin, in order to avoid the embarrassment caused by the reformer's ubiquitous universalism. The significant fact is that *high orthodox* Reformed theology developed *away* from the *early* and *more-ostensibly biblical* Reformed teaching evident in Calvin and others. Contrary to the textual data, Muller effectively mixes Calvin in the same 'scholastic soup' to suppress the evidence. However, he actually concedes that Calvin's successor Beza, and others, were more scholastic in method than the reformer. He even admits they were 'more rationalistic'. He concedes elsewhere that 'Calvin's teaching was ... capable of being cited with significant effect by Moyse Amyraut against his Reformed opponents.'

Contrary to a common misconception, even Dort did not speak for Owen who, according to Dr Gatiss, esteemed Dort, etc. 'of the best'. But, Owen never said what Baxter wrote of Dort. Indeed, Owen's rigorous dogma of limited atonement never permitted him to speak as Richard Baxter did. Besides expressing his debt to Calvin, Baxter also spoke highly of the Synod of Dort:

In the article of the extent of redemption, wherein I am most suspected and accused, I do subscribe to the Synod of Dort, without any exception, limitation, or exposition, of any word, as doubtful and obscure.

This is remarkable since the famous Synod is forever associated with the famous mnemonic 'TULIP', the 'L' standing for 'Limited Atonement'. How then is Baxter's commendation to be understood? Simply because the 'Owenite' understanding of the mnemonic does not square with the actual wording of the Canons themselves. How so? Owen's 'commercial' theory of the atonement denies any redemptive sufficiency beyond the salvation of the elect. It is only 'sufficient' for whom it is 'efficient'. The reason why Baxter could vouch for the Canons is that they state the following:

The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sins, of infinite value and worth, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world...That, however, many who have been called by the gospel neither repent nor believe in Christ but perish in unbelief does not happen because of any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice of Christ offered on the cross, but through their own fault...For this was the most free counsel of God the Father, that the life-giving and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect.

This being Baxter's view, it is generally the case that many who shout 'TULIP' have never actually read what the Canons say. One may add that the word 'limited' is nowhere used. Furthermore, a case could be made for redefining 'L' as Limitless Atonement! The point is, of course, that the Canons affirm two correlated aspects to the atonement, as Baxter - agreeing with the Anglican delegate to Dort Bishop John Davenant - always did. Neither were Arminian universalists.

Back to the 'Calvin v. the Calvinists' issue, equally 'sneeringly', Dr Gatiss rubbished the allegedly 'sneering' charge that Owen's type of orthodoxy was the result of Aristotelian 'scholasticism'. He claimed that the scholastic method is neutral with regard to conclusions. This is indefensible, especially where Owen is concerned. I have argued that in the case of his particularism, his assault on Amyraut and Baxter involved a scholastic method which *did* affect the *content* of his theology. At key points in his argument in the *Death of Death*, he

resorts to Aristotelian concepts to establish his ultra-biblical high orthodoxy. The fact remains that Owen *et al* cannot vindicate their soteriology on a *sola scriptura* basis. According to Dr Gatiss, the scholastic ‘tank brigade’ is necessary to defend the Bible! He and his friends cannot honestly say with Luther, “My conscience is captive [only] to the Word of God!”

Fifth, we were informed that Owen was ‘a prodigious Bible commentator’. The seven-volume Goold edition of the *Hebrews* commentary is indeed impressive, the two-million word scale of which Dr Gatiss highlighted with much enthusiasm. His reference to editor Andrew Thompson’s complaint about the length of the work might have been treated more seriously. After all, the prolixity of puritan authors is daunting to say the least for modern readers. Does one need such a large and lumbering commentary on such a lucid letter?

What has been said about Owen’s treatise on *Justification by Faith* arguably applies to his work on *Hebrews*. ‘The great extent of this work is one of the strongest objections to it’ wrote Orme. ‘It is unfavourable to that simplicity with which the Bible states all its doctrines... It gives divine truth too much the appearance of artificial or systematic arrangement, and by the very terms which it employs, exposes it to opposition, and oppresses it with explanations that impede rather than forward its progress’. Thompson agreed with Orme that Owen’s treatment of the nature of justifying faith tends to ‘perplex’ an enquirer, although he is quick to point out that such a censure is not to be confined to Owen. Indeed, even brilliant Baxter - who is *never* tedious - might have employed a little more brevity! In Thompson’s view, on the subject of faith, ‘The Puritan divines, with their scholastic distinctions, were far inferior to the theologians of the Reformation’.

That said, one appreciated the therapeutic importance of Owen’s work. In the aftermath of personal grief - he outlived his wife and eleven children - Owen “kept at it”, said Dr Gatiss. His indefatigability helped offset ‘the shades of the grave’. One felt keenly sympathetic for Owen at this point. In relating these details, it is a pity that the speaker found it difficult to muster the appropriate gravitas.

Dr Gatiss concluded with Owen’s legacy. Highlighting the resurgence of interest in the Puritans in general and Owen in particular, he offered an answer to the question in his lecture title. Was Owen the ‘Calvin of England?’ He thought not. Cranmer perhaps has the best claim. But even this is a highly doubtful claim. Notwithstanding the heroism of Cranmer’s eventual martyrdom, his ‘politically correct’ subservience to Henry VIII places him in a much lower league than Calvin. In short, whether or not Calvin would have had greater

success in the face of Tudor tyranny, the tragedy for the English Reformation is that we never had a Calvin.

So, if Owen was not England's Calvin, how did Dr Gatiss evaluate him? As the newly-inaugurated *John Owen Society* would suggest, he was certainly a 'top man' for whom one needs 'an acquired taste'. It remains to be said, that despite the speaker's effervescent performance, Owen can only remain the preserve of students anxious to demonstrate their academic prowess. To declare my allegiance, Richard Baxter qualifies in this respect and more. After three centuries, his evangelistic and pastoral works still throb with light and vitality in a way Owen's tomes never did. More may be said. If ever a Puritan qualified as the English Calvin it is Baxter, whose specific endorsement of the reformer is relevant and unambiguous:

I know no man, since the Apostles' days, whom I value and honour more than Calvin, and whose judgement in all things, one with another, I more esteem and come nearer to.

On a final note, Baxter's astonishing impact at Kidderminster more resembled Calvin's at Geneva than ever Owen's did at Oxford. Unlike Baxter's wonderfully-blest endeavours, Owen never knew of anyone brought to Christ under his ministry. For these reasons alone, one needs no further incentive to inaugurate *The Richard Baxter Society*. Indeed, today's Church desperately needs his testimony!

NOTE: an annotated version of this statement is available on request.