



McGraw, Ryan M., ed.

The Foundation of Communion with God: The Trinitarian Piety of John Owens

Profiles in Reformed Spirituality

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

The *Foundation of Communion with God* is a slim volume of select readings of arguably the greatest Puritan theologian of all time, John Owen. Expertly introduced by Ryan M. McGraw—who has written more substantially on Owen’s theology elsewhere—the reader learns of Owen’s life, scholastic career, and pastoral ministry before being introduced to the order of the readings in this book, which are well thought out and have a definite logical structure.

The readings themselves, 41 in all, are divided into 3 sections. The first, “Knowing God as Triune” contains the bulk of the book and establishes Owen’s focus on communion with the Trinity. It is here that he speaks most eloquently about grace, faith, redemption, and the believer’s relationship to God, especially as expressed in worship. We also get glimpses of his refutations of 17th century Socinians, which is music to the ears of the modern apologist. Funnily enough, Owen’s apologetic doesn’t proceed along the lines of rational argumentation, which would fall in line with what his opponents were doing, but rather he focuses on the goodness of God that can only be experienced if God is Trinity. We would all do well to stop treating the Trinity as a mathematical problem to be explained and instead focus on the relational aspects of Christian faith.

The second section, “Heavenly Mindedness and Apostasy” places emphasis on public worship and the ways that believers can both cultivate and destroy it. Owen saw neglecting what God has appointed for worship and adding to or changing what he has appointed as the two major ways to destroy worship and so apostatize from the faith. Bare observance of ordinances apart from faith in the gospel was also worthless, for it was in these ordinances that God communicated his grace.

Attending to the outward rituals without an appreciation for the inward spiritual realities earns the reward of self-satisfaction but nothing more. The opposite is also the case; saying that one relishes the inner aspects of worship without any outward manifestation rings hollow. It is in this section that we see Owen's heart for worship and what it truly means to speak of his piety.

The third section, "Covenant and Church" most directly addresses the church's worship under the New Covenant. It's worship wherein we have access to the Father through Christ and by the Spirit. It's in this covenant that we truly appreciate each person of the Trinity and the respective roles assumed in the covenant of redemption. Owen's view on ministers and ministry was that the ministers were there to bless the church in various ways, namely by putting the name of God on the church, by preaching the word, and by applying the word. All of this is done with an authority given to the office but rooted in Christ. The minister and the people experience preaching similarly but differently. The minister is to preach to himself first and apply the word to his own life. Preaching apart from faith and application is useless. The people encounter the Spirit through the preaching of the word.

Much more could be said but saying it would be to reproduce this gem of a volume in near entirety. It's compact but it packs quite the punch. My one complaint about Owen's theology (or at least the one I'll register here) is that his cessationist view of the gifts of the Spirit make his overall views on spiritual worship seem somewhat anemic. Is the Spirit encountered in the preaching of the word, prayer, singing, service, etc.? Absolutely! But there is a tangible encounter with the Spirit that many miss out on because they think for some odd reason that he's stopped acting in and among his people the same way that he did in the beginning.

But like I said, this is my one complaint with this volume, which is otherwise excellent. The readings have been smartly chosen, and given the length of each reading (a couple of pages), this would serve as a wonderful devotional. It's almost perfectly suited as a lenten devotional with its 41 chapters. The appendices are short and helpful. The first one addresses how to read Owen and where to get started on reading him. The second is a chronological list of Owen's works and the third is a select bibliography of works about Owen. In all I think that those who long for something a bit deeper in worship would do well to read this book. The Trinity is the center of the Christian life and yet we wouldn't be able to tell by how most Christian living is carried out. Material like this serves as a helpful reminder.