

The Holy Spirit and Reformed Spirituality



THE
HOLY SPIRIT
AND
REFORMED SPIRITUALITY

A Tribute to Geoffrey Thomas

Edited by
Joel R. Beeke and
Derek W. H. Thomas



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Preface

Having known Geoffrey Thomas for decades, we can say that, like Barnabas, “he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith” (Acts 11:24). Together with the other contributors to this book, we give public thanks for this brother’s life and ministry on the occasion of his 75th birthday. He has been a rich blessing to us and many more. Yet we know that the blessing did not come from him, but only by means of him. Another graciously stood with our brother and dwells in him: the Spirit of the living God. Though this book is dedicated to Geoff, it is about Someone far more majestic and awe-inspiring than any mere man.

Geoff Thomas has preached and written often on the Holy Spirit and His saving work. In his recent book on the Holy Spirit, Geoff reminds us that the Spirit knows everything, is everywhere, and created everything; He is absolutely holy and completely sovereign—“the infinite-almighty and yet personal God.”¹ The Bible exalts the Spirit. He is the Spirit of glory (1 Peter 4:14). He is the Spirit of counsel and might (Isa. 11:2). He is able to do what no human or angelic power can do: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). Therefore we do not merely analyze the Spirit. We worship the Spirit.

The chapters in this book seek to honor the Holy Spirit and expound on His rich ministry of filling sinners with Himself and His graces. As Geoff’s friends, we thought that our contributions on the subject of the Spirit and Reformed spirituality would excite and move him, and be a page-turner

1. Geoffrey Thomas, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 8–11.

for him. Thus it is fitting that parts of this book are biography, the first of which will no doubt embarrass him a bit. Gary Brady and Paul Levy explore the life and influence of Geoff Thomas as an example, by grace, of a Spirit-filled minister. John J. Murray offers a tribute to the Spirit's fruit in the great Reformed theologian-exegete, Professor John Murray. Robert Oliver takes us back to the sixteenth century to the Spirit-worked boldness of Edward Dering, who rebuked Queen Elizabeth to her face.

The Holy Spirit carried along the prophets to write the Holy Scriptures. He inspired each stroke of the pen upon the ancient scrolls. The Holy Spirit opens our minds to receive the truth. He is the Spirit of truth. Therefore we honor the Spirit by studying the Word and reflecting on theology. Carl Trueman studies the work of the Spirit in the life of Christ, Sam Waldron the righteousness of Christ as the basis of the Spirit's work in us, Fred Malone the relationship between the Spirit's sovereignty and human responsibility in conversion and spiritual growth, and Gary Benfold the intersection of sovereignty and responsibility in evangelism.

The Holy Spirit stirs our hearts to trust and love Christ. Reformed Christianity emphasizes the experiential dimension of the Spirit's work. Joel Beeke considers the Spirit's illumination of the heart, David Jones the Spirit's indwelling in the believer, and Derek Thomas the nature of spiritual-mindedness.

The Holy Spirit builds Christ's church. We must never separate the Spirit from the body of Christ, for we are His temple. Iain Campbell, Ian Hamilton, Michael Haykin, Stephen Turner, Conrad Mbewe, and Austin Walker each contribute chapters on the Spirit's indwelling God's people and sanctifying them, His guarding their heart, His calling men into pastoral ministry, and His empowering and supporting them.

We have arranged these chapters under four headings reflecting the Spirit's various works: Part I focuses on Geoff Thomas as a faithful instrument of the Spirit, Part II on Christ and salvation, Part III on growth in holiness, and Part IV on ministry.

It should come as no surprise that this book repeatedly leans on the insight of the Reformers and the Puritans. The Spirit of God shone brightly in such men, and they in turn intently studied the work of the Spirit in applying the redemption purchased by Christ.

All quotations from the Scripture are from the King James or New King James versions. Many thanks go to Gary Brady, Geoff's son-in-law, who is the original inspiration behind this book. What a joy he and all of Geoff's happy children and their spouses are to him! Thanks too to dear Iola for being such a wonderful support to her husband over the decades, so that he could be who God made him to be as a friend and as a minister. And thanks, too, to all who have contributed to this volume in honor of our mutual friend.

It is our hope that God will use this book to pour out the Spirit once again upon His church, and raise up more men who, like Geoff, love to honor the person and ministry of the Spirit of Christ. But ultimately this book and its authors look beyond man to the ultimate goal and end of all things, the Lord Himself. May the Spirit use this effort to bring the kingdom of Christ to earth for the glory of the Father forever!

—Joel R. Beeke and Derek Thomas



PART I

Geoff Thomas: A Faithful Instrument of the Spirit



Hugh Geoffrey Thomas: A Biographical Appreciation

On October 15, 2013, Hugh Geoffrey Thomas—Geoff, as he is known to all—will be seventy-five years old. Shortly after that, he will mark the forty-eighth year since he became pastor of Alfred Place Baptist Church in Aberystwyth, Wales.

The move to Aberystwyth took place late in October 1965, when Geoff and Iola, who had married the previous year (along with their six-week old baby girl, Eleri), moved up from Swansea, where Geoff had been working for the National Coal Board and Iola had been teaching in a secondary school.

That move marks the meridian line of Geoff's life, dividing it neatly, if somewhat asymmetrically, in two. First is the relatively varied and peripatetic twenty-seven years before Aberystwyth, then comes the more than forty, less varied but in many ways equally peripatetic, years based at the Buarth Road manse.

Being in Mid Wales, Aberystwyth can be thought of as a kind of compromise location, as Geoff was raised in South Wales and Iola Williams in Blaenau Ffestiniog, North Wales. They have much in common. In both homes, one parent was Congregationalist and the other Baptist. Both have relatives who have been university professors of the Welsh language. Both had uncles who were ministers trained in liberal theology. "We were both brands plucked from the burnt-over churches modernism had destroyed," Geoff once commented.

Two more girls were born in 1968 and 1972. I married Eleri in 1988, and her sisters married in 1994. There are nine grandchildren altogether,

born between 1989 and 2008.¹ All seventeen of us get together from time to time, and those are occasions of great joy.

I first met Geoff in 1977 when I came, as an eighteen-year-old, to study at the university. He had then been a pastor some twelve years.² So I have known Geoff for well over half my life and nearly half of his. In writing about him, then, I have advantages and disadvantages.

Before Aberystwyth, 1938–1965

Perhaps the best way to cover this ground is to consider the chief influences, cultural and theological, that, under God, prepared Geoff for ministry. One can detect at least four strands.

The English-speaking South Wales valleys

First, there is the largely English-speaking milieu of industrial South Wales in which Geoff grew up and which was reinforced chiefly by his parents and by his schooling. Harry Eastaway Thomas (1905–1978) and Elizabeth Francis (1906–1995) married in the early 1930s. Geoff was born in 1938 and was their only surviving child. Harry's twin brother became a Congregational minister and, under liberal influence, was apparently afraid to preach the apostle Paul for years. Harry's sister was also married to a Congregational minister.

Harry worked for the railways, serving as stationmaster in various places and latterly at Hengoed. Geoff often says that his mother was always singing hymns. He assumed that was how every mother went about her housework! Both parents were churchgoers, but for many years attended different chapels, dad the Congregational and mom, the Baptist. Geoff once described his father's church this way:

1. Catrin and Ian live with their son, Osian, in Wiltshire; Fflur and Glyn with their children, Iwan, Lydia, and Tomos, in Cardiff. Ian and Glyn are deacons; I pastor in London. Our five boys are Rhodri, Dylan, Dewi, Gwion, and Owain; Rhodri and his wife, Sibyl, live in Aber.

2. In 1976, Geoff preached at the church I attended. I have to confess to not recalling the occasion until reminded of it when we first met. How sleepy we can be when significant things are happening under our noses!

One of the most dynamic Congregationalist churches in the world a century ago, Bethania, Dowlais. A thousand strong congregation, its membership then was overwhelmingly evangelical but its ministers steadily and secretly moved into humanism in the old familiar way, becoming Arminian, bolstering man's free will as the pivot for every step in religion, abandoning the Old Testament in huge chunks, and soon after such a momentous step of defiance of Jesus' convictions, they turned against the apostle Paul in the New Testament. So they gave up Jesus' view of Scripture and Jesus' greatest spokesman and they imagined they could still be loyal to this living person and not grieve him deeply. The brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God became for them the message of the Christian religion.³

Geoff passed the 11-plus examination for high school and qualified to attend one of the best state schools in the area, Lewis School, Pengam. Years before, David Lloyd George had described it as the Eton of the South Wales valleys. Geoff remained there for seven years and did well academically, athletically, and in other ways.⁴ Not required to do national service and having some thoughts of entering the ministry, he continued to live at home when he went on to do university-level work in biblical studies with Greek and philosophy at the nearby Baptist College in Cardiff.

South Wales in the 1950s was still dominated by the coal industry and the left-wing politics the industry tended to foment. The 1904–1905 revival was something of a dim and distant memory for most. Geoff speaks very warmly of his mother's uncle, Oliver Bound, an antiques dealer and evangelist who had been touched by the revival. However, the chapels where Geoff's parents attended and the biblical studies department in Cardiff were alike affected by the ravages of liberalism.

3. Quotations in this chapter are mainly from two online articles: http://www.alfred-placechurch.org.uk/?page_id=3593 and http://www.banneroftruth.co.uk/pages/articles/article_detail.php?932. Quotations not footnoted can be located in one of these articles.

4. It is perhaps no surprise to learn of his prowess at long jump and triple jump. He was also part of a record-breaking relay team with John Dawes, later Wales and British Lions rugby coach. A younger contemporary, Neil Kinnock, would become Labour Party leader and Lord Bedwellty. "I only remember him drawing tanks," Geoff once said.

The Welsh-speaking milieu of North and South Wales

The Welsh-speaking milieu is found chiefly in North and West Wales, but also to some extent in the South. In ancient times, Cymric or Welsh (as the English call it) was spoken throughout the British Isles. With the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, early forms of English began to predominate and the native language was driven into the hills and far corners of the British Isles. England formally conquered Wales in 1282, with the two countries being united practically in 1485 and officially in 1536. Throughout the nineteenth century, the London government pursued an aggressive policy of promoting English so that by the twentieth century, only 20 percent of people in Wales spoke Welsh.

Geoff's father could speak Welsh, but because his mother could not, Welsh was rarely used at home. His cousin, Robert Maynard Jones (Bobi Jones), was brought up in a similar way but became proficient in the Welsh language while still at school, going on to be professor of Welsh in Aberystwyth University. He has published more works in the Welsh language than anyone before him. Some will be familiar with his translations of hymns by William Williams and others. Geoff himself had some Welsh, but was not at home with the language until marrying Iola, whom he met while studying in Cardiff. A Welsh speaker from birth, her passion for the language is boundless. Her parents were keen nationalists and lovers of the ancient but then apparently dying tongue. Iola's only sister, Rhiain, also lives in Aberystwyth, with her husband, Keith. Like Bobi and his wife, Beti, they are long-serving members of the town's Welsh-speaking evangelical church. Geoff's English has always been better than his Welsh, but he is able to listen to, and benefit from, preaching in Welsh, and on rare occasions he even has opportunity to preach in what some call the language of heaven.

Westminster Seminary and the United States

A further strand was added in 1961 when Geoff sailed in a cargo ship from Liverpool, England, to Newport, Virginia. (He read Jonathan Edwards's *Religious Affections* en route.) He went to spend three years studying theology in the institution founded by J. Gresham Machen in 1929, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. Geoff's professors included John Murray, E. J. Young, Cornelius Van Til, and Ed Clowney. The formative

influences of American Reformed theology and the American way of life on Geoff cannot be underestimated. I personally believe that his ideas of distance and of how to use a telephone were formed in those now far-off days when America was a much different place from Britain. These ideas do not conform to those of many British people of his age, for whom telephones are for emergencies and who consider covering three hundred miles in one day excessive.

Geoff has continued to travel quite extensively in the United States, speaking at various churches and conferences year after year, and has a pretty good idea of what is going on theologically on the American side of the pond.

The resurgence of Reformed theology in the United Kingdom

The fourth strand is partly personified in Banner of Truth Trust founder Iain Murray, but it includes a host of influences, such as London Welshman, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the Strict and Particular (or Grace Baptists) of England, and the various shades of evangelical Presbyterianism found in Scotland, Ireland, and America, countries where Geoff has often preached.

To understand Geoffrey Thomas properly and what has made him the pastor and preacher he has been over these last forty-eight years, these four elements at least must be taken into account. Alongside these there is a genuine openness to all sorts of influences, secular and religious, too numerous to identify individually. Geoff is something of a culture vulture; in his home, he can be found listening to classical music, especially Mahler. On the walls of the manse are original paintings by local artists and prints by Vermeer and others. A subscription to *The Spectator* magazine betrays a conservative position politically (although it is probably the socialists of Plaid Cymru who usually get his vote). Favorite secular authors include Philip Johnson and Roger Scruton. There is also a warm glow of pride prompted by the family connection to the war poet Edward Eastaway Thomas. Living in a university town and often travelling to London, Geoff always has concerts, dramas, films, and exhibitions to enjoy. He carefully keeps up with reviews of the latest offerings.

Conversion and call to preach

In an interview in 2007, Geoff was asked about his conversion. He explained how his mother was a Baptist and how, influenced by her Uncle Oliver, she “gave her heart to the Lord Jesus” some time during the First World War period. He said warmly that “she maintained a sweet love for the Savior all her life.” He spoke of her as “tender, modest, self-effacing to a degree, wonderfully kind and loving.” He confessed, “I am like a mouse before an elephant when measured by her graces.”⁵

He went on to say:

I went with my mother to church (the lamb follows the ewe) and in 1951 we moved to Hengoed where the Tabernacle Baptist church had been erected a hundred yards from our house almost fifty years earlier. It had started as a split-away from the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church across the other side of the valley in Maesycwmmmer when the 1904 revival affected that church and bifurcated the congregation. It was made impossible for those who had “entered into the blessing” to remain in the church and so they resigned and set up the Tabernacle half a mile away. Unfortunately they remained linked naïvely to the Baptist Union and so received into their pulpits the students and ministers who rejected the appallingly pessimistic evaluation of the human condition found in the Bible, one which could be relieved only by the incarnation, righteous life and atonement of the Son of God. Bland universalism and bourgeois ethics became the message of the day, disguised under traditional hymns and God words. Such insipid views depended largely on “personalities” to keep the wagons trundling on.

Geoff was brought to Christ when a young minister came to the church and began earnestly preaching for a decision. This was in 1954. He was soon baptized and joined to the church. Sadly, the young minister, infected by liberal teaching, lost his way, and the church shrank and shrank. It was eventually disbanded and the building demolished.

Geoff says that he sought fellowship wherever he could find it—in summer camps and then at university in the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. In 1958, he heard Dr. Lloyd-Jones preach for the first time. That summer,

5. http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_print.php?1335

he also read two books that influenced him greatly. One was Lloyd-Jones's *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*. Geoff says of that book that it "will show you the beauty of a righteous life and make you want to live it, and it will also show you what consecutive biblical preaching can achieve." The other book was Dr. J. I. Packer's crucial *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. He also read around this time J. C. Ryle's *Holiness* and George Whitefield's *Journals*, and subscribed to a new magazine called *The Banner of Truth*.

By such means—even finding good books in the local library—he began to discover good theology. "God brought these things before me," he recalls, "His hand was upon me." He discovered "a growing group of role models, the 'sons' of Dr. Lloyd-Jones, some of them my contemporaries at University, and others who were younger Welsh ministers." These would include such men as Eifon Evans, Hugh Morgan, and a man who was to die tragically young but who would have a big influence on Geoff as a young man, J. B. Thomas of Swansea.

In 1959, Geoff preached for the first time. However, he confesses:

It was only during the last months of my course at Seminary that I was assured of a call to preach, though I guess there was nothing else I ever wanted to do or was fit to do. It seemed a huge step to announce that I was going to be a preacher, but the counsels of Edmund P. Clowney, the most approachable, kindly and prayerful of teachers, were crucial in prodding me to come out with the inevitable decision.

Meeting Professor Clowney years later, Geoff was moved to be told, "Geoff, I have prayed for you every day."

Aberystwyth, 1965 to the present

Following his return from America and marriage, there was a period of about fifteen months before Geoff took up a pastorate. Convinced that the Lord wanted him to minister in Wales, he was drawn to Aberystwyth partly by the presence of a university in the town. Ministry among students was to prove an important part of his future work. The other big factor was the presence of evangelical believers keen to be taught.

If you stand in the tiny street called Alfred Place in Aberystwyth, you can see two Baptist churches diagonally opposite each other. Over the road

is Bethel Baptist, a Welsh-speaking church, and in Alfred Place itself is the English Baptist Church put up by the Bethel folk in 1870 for the benefit of holidaymakers unable to understand Welsh. Over the years, the churches have led a fairly separate existence.

By the time Geoff came to Alfred Place in 1965, there was some confusion about the gospel. However, some of the people were to prove to be great supporters. Geoff was very grateful for one particular deacon who was an enormous support when he arrived. He commented, “A minister needs only one man like that and in a sense he is home and dry.” That man’s son and one of his grandsons are deacons in the church today. Within seven years, it was possible, in what was then an innovation, to appoint three elders, two of whom remain in the church to this day. There were also godly women in the church, for all of whom Geoff has publicly expressed his deepest gratitude. He says:

[The people were] patient with me in my early learning to be a pastor-preacher, checking and encouraging me. For them, Christians everywhere are also most appreciative. They know that I could never have survived in a church for so long without the support of older wise men who would rise up and be counted during the inevitable battles.

Even the strong believers were in need of sound teaching, and that is exactly what they got from the young seminary graduate. From the beginning, he was determined to preach the Word. He confesses to having come “back from three years at Westminster Seminary full of graduate theology,” which had its drawbacks. He had spent six years—“those long years from 18 to 24”—with students, “that narrow spectrum of age and communication and interest. It was not the most helpful approach to preaching popularly to my fellow countrymen.” Not that he despised the teaching of Murray, Van Til, and the others. “How can I demean such training?” he asks. Of Professor Murray, Geoff always speaks only in the most respectful, even reverential tones.

Preaching

From the beginning, Geoff’s pattern was to preach systematically through the books of the Bible. He began with Genesis 1:1 and Matthew 1:1, but difficulties with plowing through the whole book of Genesis led to a

modification of his original plan, so that he has not dealt with books in any particular order. He spoke once of how “modernism has shrunk the sermon to a comment on current affairs and book reviews.” In Geoff’s ministry, expository preaching has always been central. He has written:

The preacher can minister to an entire congregation with all the differing needs of that gathering. The Word of God opened up and applied to the hearers can come upon them from all 360 degrees. The lines at which it comes running to you make sinners utterly defenceless to resist. This wisdom comes unexpectedly, from whence they least expect such truths to be dealing with them, from passages that seemed, when first announced, remote to their own needs, but by them God worked and elevated and inspired and reassured and directed. Hope was rekindled; conviction was experienced; love was reborn. When I look back to my own peak Christian experiences then so many of them have been when I was under the Word of God as it was preached to me and I melted, or again when it was I who was the spokesman and mouthpiece of God, and the congregation was still during the sermon, motionless after the service was over, knowing God was in this place. I have felt after such meetings that saving power was present though I might never hear of any specific individuals converted that day.

As for early influences, he once said:

I found Al Martin⁶ and Donald Macleod invaluable helps in preaching in the 1970s. I preached their sermons and envied their clear outlines and passion in delivery. Such men helped me to build on the Doctor and my Welsh role models to form me. I have also had Iain Murray as my most consistently helpful counsellor, and consider his friendship and advice the most single blessed support. If there is one man whose books I must read as they appear it has to be...Iain Murray.⁷

Geoff is not oblivious to the difficulties of systematic preaching. A few years back he wrote:

But to do what I set out to do, preach through all the Bible, is inevitably to end in failure. All ministry ends in failure, of course. The plan

6. Geoff did a six-week pulpit exchange with Al Martin in the 1970s. The moving of the Alfred Place morning service from 11 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. can be dated to this period.

7. <http://menforministry.blogspot.co.uk/2007/10/men-for-ministry-interview-series-geoff.html>.

and the noble attempt to accomplish it was simply mine; God's plan for me was different. But I believe it was praiseworthy to try to preach through it all.

He speaks of having painted himself into a corner with several difficult books still to be tackled. He has said:

I am not sure whether I will ever "finish" the task God gave me to preach the Word. Sometime I feel I have left for myself some of the more demanding books of the Old Testament (as far as a preacher is concerned), or the second halves of books once started which after a year or two were abandoned as, alas, wearying to myself and the congregation. Generally I have felt an unease about a number of books before I commenced them, or about verses and passages looming up ahead, wondering how I could preach on such passages. Yet in the discipline of study and meditation those chapters and books have come alive; they have been a delight. I wish I had had more role models of preachers and preaching through Old Testament books. I have proved to be an uncertain guide myself in that department.

Tradition

If you came to Alfred Place one Sunday, you would find it quite traditional. Wooden pews face a raised platform (which conceals a baptistery beneath) with a square pipe organ to the preacher's left. For many years, the largely conservative *Grace Hymns* has been the main hymnbook. For a few less years, Scripture readings have all been from the 1984 New International Version, which slowly superseded the King James Version in the 1980s. The service follows the pattern of what has somewhat derogatorily been called "the hymn sandwich," including four carefully chosen hymns, notices or announcements, a reading, a long prayer, and a sermon of around forty-five minutes. Geoff loves to speak from the pulpit to any children present. A gifted storyteller, he usually has a nice one to share. Capitalizing on a Welsh tradition, there is usually a verse of Scripture to learn. (In earlier days, children would each stand up and repeat the verse learned from the previous week.) Since 1977, no collection has been taken up, but people are invited to place their gifts in boxes near the entrance. A cup of tea is served downstairs after the evening service.

Geoff does it all. He comments:

I have led the Sunday services myself. I announce the hymns, and I publicly read the Scriptures—I whose life uniquely in the congregation is spent in the Word. The pastoral prayer must be mine whose time is spent in healing, encouraging and correcting the people of God. All this is very acceptable to a congregation who accept one tremendous reality, that the Creator of the whole cosmos has summoned this man to bring his message to bear on these people, and it would be utterly woeful for me if they did not hear the Creator's servant and I did not preach to them in a way that was most suitable to his glory. "Why do you take the entire service?" I am asked. "Because I have this calling from God and no one else in the congregation has it," is my reply. People then can think about the God I am speaking of and not about a parade of personalities. At the midweek meeting opportunity is given to anyone to share something with the gathering, though rarely do people speak.

With regard to the hymns, a careful record is kept so that most hymns are sung only once or twice a year. The congregation is quite musical, and Geoff is keen to introduce new tunes from time to time. He has written of his preference for great hymns, old and new. Old hymns often come "from an era more filled with both the Spirit and great poets than our forlorn age," Geoff says.

The midweek meeting is usually on Tuesday in the basement below the church. One arrives to find photocopies of the prayer letters and e-mails from the past week set out on the chairs. The pattern is to begin with unaccompanied hymns, while a reading and message take up the next half an hour. There is then some discussion—rarely about what has been said but mostly about prayer topics—followed by half an hour or so of prayer. If things are a little slow, Geoff will call on one of the men to lead.

Ever changing

Over the years, there have been inevitable changes in the life of the congregation. While its core remains stable, the population of Aberystwyth is fairly mobile, as in most places today. The coming and going of students adds to this flux, as does the fact that Aberystwyth is a holiday destination. The smallest congregations are usually just before Christmas, when few

students or holidaymakers are about. Geoff has commented that an enduring ministry is helped by this factor:

If a church is set in an area where there is some economic stability or in a city, or the place has a history of an earlier grace then there is more expectation of growth. If our building had been set in a valley miles outside Aberystwyth then the impact of the pulpit would have been muted, and the duration of my ministry would have been considerably briefer. However, our church was situated ideally, in the middle of town, a block from the sea, in a community of 13,000 people where today an additional 8,000 students are attending the university. The discipleship and consecration of 40 years of students have been an inspiration both to myself and the congregation. They have warmed the wintry months of the year.

Pastoral visiting is made easier by the fact that the town is fairly compact and it is possible to walk from the manse to the local hospital. However, because the town is on the edge of a rural community, some live in the outlying villages and, from time to time, some are hospitalized elsewhere.

On his fortieth anniversary of ministry, Geoff was able to write:

I am as much committed to change today as I was forty years ago, to change myself, and the entire congregation, the churches of the town, the community of which we are a part and Wales as a whole. The Christian wants to change the world, and the one great instrument for change which we have been given is the Bible.

Given that Geoff has remained in one place and has changed little with regard to the services over the years, this may sound surprising to some. A number of people have left Alfred Place over the years because of a perceived unwillingness to change. One thing that has often struck me, however, is Geoff's willingness to try something new. For instance, in sermon preparation, Geoff continues to write out all he has to say, though he is never tied to his notes. Over the years, however, like others, he has moved from handwritten manuscripts to word-processed documents, and in more recent years has had the manuscripts printed and copied for the use of those who may find a written sermon easier to absorb. In a similar way, he has co-operated with others to produce not only audio but also written sermons on the Internet.

Church life

The Alfred Place church left the Baptist Union shortly after Geoff's arrival, owing to the mixed nature of that denomination. It has remained independent but has not become isolated, interacting with other churches in the town and throughout the area whenever possible.

One early initiative was the establishment of a bookshop, now adjacent to the church building and a major asset. For many years, the church has sought to support the preaching of Bud Mort to the deaf. The church was also able to establish a home for those with learning difficulties at Plas Lluest, which opened in 1975.

One of the most encouraging works with which the church has been involved over the years is the Reformed Baptist work in Kenya started by Keith Underhill. Keith was converted while studying in Aberystwyth and then worked as a schoolteacher in Kenya. After he completed his ministerial training at Westminster Seminary, the church sent him to begin church planting in Nairobi. Since then, the number of Reformed Baptist churches in that part of East Africa has mushroomed, and Keith has been greatly used to convert and teach a large number of people. Geoff has often visited Nairobi and the more remote parts where gospel work goes on to this day.

In each of the areas mentioned, there have been many difficulties and much heartache as work has developed, difficulties have been encountered, and sometimes serious division faced. Through it all, the Lord has continued to sustain the work and to use His servant.

Men in the ministry

One gratifying feature of the work has been that several men have either been called to the ministry while in the congregation or strengthened in their convictions under Geoff's ministry. Underhill is an obvious example. Derek Thomas, Austin Walker, Graham Heaps, and Chris Peggington are others from the early period. We might also mention Ed Collier, Spencer Cunnah, Alan Davey, Malcolm Firth, Keith Hoare, Luke Jenner, Ian Middlemist, Tim Mills, Dan Peters, Mark Picket and Mark Rowcroft. I personally felt a call to the ministry before going to Aberystwyth, but sitting under Geoff's ministry, observing him both out of the pulpit and in it, and on occasion turning to him for pastoral counsel, was an invaluable blessing.

Conferences

In the second week of August each year, the Evangelical Movement of Wales Conference takes place in Aberystwyth. Geoff has been a great friend of the conference over the years, often speaking at evening meetings and seminars. In 1997, he was the main speaker. His book *Daniel: Servant of God under Four Kings* grew out of addresses given at that time.

Since Geoff ministered in Aberystwyth, people arriving for the conference on the preceding Sunday naturally gravitated to Alfred Place. As the conference grew, more elaborate arrangements were necessary, including the changing of times and venue. Enthusiasm for the ministry eventually led to what has become a virtual mini-conference, wherein the Sunday ministry is supplemented by a third well-attended but no-frills Monday morning sermon.

The UK is well blessed with conferences of a Reformed persuasion and similar gatherings. There can be few at which Geoff has not spoken more than once, either preaching or giving a historical paper. These include the Carey Ministers Conference, the Westminster Conference, and Grace Assembly. Geoff is a great believer in conferences, noting that loners in the ministry are often defect in and from the ministry by one means or another.

Books and articles

Mention of the book on Daniel also prompts us to note Geoff's written ministry. Geoff is an inveterate writer. He has kept a daily diary of events for decades and has written increasingly over the years for publication, first chiefly in magazines and newspapers, then in compilations, and, in time, in books of his own. His books include *The Life of Ernest Reisinger*, *Philip and the Great Revival in Samaria*, *The Sure Word of God*, and *The Holy Spirit*.

Conclusion

For Geoff, life has been and continues to be very full. Besides the demands of regular ministry, there are frequent preaching trips throughout the British Isles and overseas. Over the years, besides making regular trips to America and Canada, he has travelled to many other countries, including Albania, Brazil, Russia, and South Korea.

I am sometimes asked how he manages to do so much. People sometimes assume Geoff must be in a constant whirr. In fact, the secret, it seems to me, lies chiefly in his ability to relax. There are times when he is unable to sleep well, but otherwise he seems to have a rare ability both to work hard at one time and to sit back and relax at another, something some preachers find difficult to do.

Geoff himself would also point out that he has been blessed with a wife of consistent godliness and prayerfulness. "She accepted my absences and kept me in the pulpit," he once wrote. With her training in biblical studies and her skill in teaching the Scriptures, she has also worked faithfully over many years.

Beyond all this, of course, is the wonderful sustaining grace of God that both have known. Some years ago, Geoff reflected on the question, "Have you lost the wonder of the gospel of Jesus Christ?" His answer was an honest and resounding no. He said:

I still have a passion for ministry, and pastoring, and officers' meetings, and the struggle of the two sermons each Sunday. The message is still wonderfully life-enhancing; the changes in the lives of men and women are still deeply encouraging. I shall be happy to give myself for another year or so if God wills preaching 84 sermons on Sundays and more than 40 during the week. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe.

No one goes on ministering on earth forever, but we are thankful that the Lord has spared His servant these many years and pray that God will continue to make him a faithful instrument of the Spirit.



Chapter 3
by Carl Trueman

The Spirit and the Word Incarnate: John Owen's Trinitarian Christology

The phrase “Just preach the text” is, like a number of other evangelical catchphrases (such as “No creed but the Bible!”), both true and false at the same time. It is surely the aspiration of every preacher “just” to preach the text in terms of remaining faithful to the chosen text’s divine intention and revelational scope. Yet anyone who has ever preached with any regularity knows that just preaching an isolated text can be a problem. To preach a text properly, the preacher must always set the chosen passage into the context not only of the book in which it occurs but also that of the whole of biblical revelation. This means that, whether we like the terminology or not, we have to take into account the contours and constraints of systematic theology even as we exegete and apply individual passages. No preacher can afford to expound any single passage or text in a way that would lead to a twisted or imbalanced reading of any other part of Scripture.

Of course, the debate over the relationship between exegesis, biblical theology, and systematic theology has been rumbling for centuries and shows no sign of abating. The purpose of this chapter is thus not to undertake the fool’s errand of attempting to resolve or even to describe all of the points at issue. My primary task is the far more delightful one of honoring Geoffrey Thomas, a man whose faithful exposition of the Word of God has touched many lives, including my own. Thus, I wish to outline in brief compass one area in which the preaching of the biblical text is helped by the systematic theological constructions of the Reformed faith. In so doing, I hope to show the happy marriage of two of Geoff’s great loves.

Perhaps some of the most acute passages in which the biblical text seems to run up against the conclusions of classical orthodox systematics are those

that speak of development and struggle in the life of Christ. Indeed, the Incarnation accounts are surely those places in Scripture where the need to connect the eternal God to the temporal creation becomes most acute. The Christian preacher wants to defend the absolute priority, transcendence, and independence of God. At the same time, he wants to do justice to the reality of the Incarnation and to the fact that a docetic Christ who merely seems to be human is inadequate as a means of giving an account of the biblical data. The humanity of the Incarnation is vital, yet this very humanity throws up key challenges to the preacher every time he speaks of Jesus.

For example, Luke 2:40 and 52 speak of Jesus growing and maturing, and increasing in favor with both God and man. There is movement, drama, and development here that the preacher must not only acknowledge but also make a constitutive part of his message. Then there are the accounts of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, His struggle in the garden of Gethsemane, and, of course, His death on the cross, with its powerful and mysterious cry of dereliction. In each case, the challenge for the preacher is to draw out the reality of the development, change, or struggle that is described in the text while at the same time respecting systematic concerns over divine simplicity, immutability, and impassibility.

These passages are not describing some piece of playacting on the part of Christ. Surely anyone who has ever seen a great drama on the stage will acknowledge that such has a direct emotional power that vanishes when the same is mediated via television. Yet the struggles of the incarnate Christ are not the equivalent of a theater production; their significance does not lie merely in eliciting an emotional response from the audience. It is not that Jesus is simply going through the motions like an actor on stage while yet being personally detached from what is happening. The growth is real; the temptations are real; the agonizing struggle in the garden is real; and the cry on the cross is real. To say less than this would be to turn Christ into a docetic phantasm and to reduce His significance to that of provoking an audience reaction. Neither is the significance of such struggle restricted to the Gospel narratives. The writer of Hebrews makes it quite clear that the dynamism of Christ's life is essential to His role as the believer's heavenly High Priest (Heb. 2:18; 5:14–16). The struggle is real and its significance is deeply theological.

One strategy with such texts is simply to abandon the classical understanding of God as simple and take the texts at face value. This has proved a popular move in recent theology, though it is often driven less by concerns about the biblical passages than by the problem of suffering as it occurs in secular history. I am not concerned to refute such moves here, though I would agree with critics who see such an approach as collapsing the distinction between the Creator and His creatures. In this chapter, I wish simply to highlight how one leading representative of Reformed Orthodoxy, John Owen (1616–83), developed a Christology that is quite capable of handling the textual issues from the perspective of classical doctrine.

The classical christological background

Like so many of his contemporaries, Owen had little interest in innovating in the area of theology. He was content to use the concepts and categories that had been forged by the church over a millennium and a half to articulate, elaborate, and, where necessary, defend orthodoxy. When it came to Christology, the basic terms of debate had been set by the Nicene Creed, as formulated at the Council of Constantinople in 381 and (for Western theologians) modified at a council in Toledo in 589 with the addition of the “and from the Son” clause with respect to the procession of the Holy Spirit; and also by the formula ratified at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. In short, these councils established basic parameters for future christological discussion: God is eternally one God, in one substance and three subsistences or persons; Christ is fully God and fully man, one person with two natures; and His natures are to be neither so separated that the unity of His person is undermined (the heresy of Nestorianism) nor so mixed that He is neither God nor man but a third something, an amalgam of the two (the heresy of Eutychianism). Neither Nestorianism nor Eutychianism described a Christ who could act as Savior.

The Chalcedonian Formula solved one set of problems but raised another. New christological questions emerged: for example, how many wills does Christ have? The answer—two—need not detain us here but points toward the need for theologians (and thus preachers) always to have some understanding of historical theology and the genealogy of doctrine in

order to be able to operate with theological competence in the study and the pulpit. Only thus can apparently bizarre answers to such questions be seen as coherent and, indeed, the only viable ones.

One important question was this: Where does the “incarnate One’s” personhood originate? Once the church established the language of nature and person as normative for discussing God and Christology, this question was bound to arise. If the Incarnation was the union of a divine person with a human person, then one had Nestorianism, two persons occupying one space. Thus, in the sixth century, theologian Leontius of Byzantium proposed that the human nature of Christ should be considered as having no personhood in and of itself but receiving such only upon its union with the divine person of the Logos. This notion is called that of anhypostatic human nature, literally human nature without hypostasis or personhood. It is an odd formula, but it solved the problem generated by the Nicene and Chalcedonian approaches to God and Christology.

Owen on the Incarnation

All of this might seem like so much angels dancing on pinheads to those who simply want to “preach the text,” but it is actually of great significance to the problem noted above, that of doing justice to the dynamic of Christ’s earthly life. Indeed, the anhypostasis theory provided Owen with the key to understanding Christ in a manner that allowed him to preach the biblical text in a way that preserved both divine transcendence and the reality of incarnate development and struggle. His major exposition of the significance of this for his Christology occurs in his treatise on the Holy Spirit. Here is the key passage that lays down the basic principles:

1. The only singular immediate *act* of the person of the Son on the human nature was the *assumption* of it into subsistence with himself. Herein the Father and the Spirit had no interest nor concurrence, εἰ μὴ κατ’ εὐδοκίαν καὶ βούλησιν, “but by approbation and consent,” as Damascen speaks: for the Father did not assume the human nature, he was not incarnate; neither did the Holy Spirit do so; but this was the peculiar act and work of the Son. See John 1:14; Rom. 1:3; Gal. 4:4; Phil. 2:6, 7; Heb. 2:14, 16; which places, with many others to the

same purpose, I have elsewhere expounded, and vindicated from the exceptions of the Socinians.

2. That the only *necessary consequent* of this assumption of the human nature, or the incarnation of the Son of God, is the *personal union of Christ*, or the inseparable subsistence of the *assumed nature* in the person of the Son. This was necessary and indissoluble, so that it was not impeached nor shaken in the least by the temporary dissolution of that nature by the separation of the soul and body: for the union of the soul and body in Christ did not constitute him a person, that the dissolution of them should destroy his personality; but he was a person by the uniting of both unto the Son of God.

3. That all other actings of God in the *person of the Son* towards the human nature were *voluntary*, and did not necessarily ensue on the union mentioned; for there was no transfusion of the properties of one nature into the other, nor real physical communication of divine essential excellencies unto the humanity.¹

Three things are important to note here. First, the only direct and necessary consequence of incarnational union is that the human nature of Christ receives personhood from the Son. This avoids Nestorianism, the view that Christ is two persons, since the human nature, neither logically nor chronologically, possesses personhood of itself or outside the union. From the moment of its existence, the human nature is in union with the divine; but it is utterly dependent upon the divine for its possession of personhood or subsistence.

Second, by stating that all other actions of the Son on the human nature are voluntary, Owen precludes any possibility that the human nature possesses divine attributes merely as a result of the union. Thus, Christ as human does not have infinite knowledge any more than He is ubiquitous. This preserves the basic Reformed axiom that the finite cannot comprehend the infinite, and also guards against the Lutheran notion of the direct communication of properties between the natures. Christ's human nature is like ours, sin excepted. His body is geographically circumscribed; it is subject to all of the same physical limitations as ours.

1. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 3, ed. W. H. Goold (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862), 160–61.

Third, and most significant from the perspective of this chapter, this view creates space for addressing the dynamism of the Gospel narratives and the theological claims that the Incarnation involves real struggle and real temptation, and these are fundamental to Christ's work as Savior. This occurs in two particular ways that are of great value to the preacher.

The role of the Holy Spirit

First, Christ's struggles and temptations open up a significant place for the role of the Holy Spirit in the incarnate life of Christ. Christians are familiar with the Spirit's role in the conception of Christ by Mary, but the Gospel accounts contain many references to the Spirit beyond the birth narratives. The Spirit descends on Christ at His baptism and then immediately drives Him out into the wilderness. Christ is said to be "full of the Spirit" (Luke 4:1). Christ is also constantly withdrawing to pray. The life of Christ is, in other words, one of profound Trinitarian communion in which the Spirit plays an absolutely crucial role.

Thus, Owen's construction of the Incarnation has both a theological and an exegetical advantage. Theologically, it drives a view of Christ that is utterly Trinitarian. One of the notorious weaknesses among the inhabitants of evangelical pews is the difficulty of many in articulating why the doctrine of the Trinity is important. They know that modalism and tritheism are wrong, but they cannot necessarily explain why that is the case. Owen's christological formulations dovetail beautifully with the Gospel narratives as they describe the growth of Christ to maturity and the role of the Spirit within that context.

Thus, we might take as an example the temptation story in Luke 4. This is framed (vv. 1 and 14) by references to the Spirit. The Spirit fills Christ and leads Him into the wilderness (Mark's language is stronger: the Spirit "hurls" Him into the wilderness, 1:12). Clearly the text demands christological nuance: if the Incarnation in and of itself is fully sufficient for Christ's mediation, why is the Spirit necessary here? With Owen's christological construction, the answer is obvious: Christ in His human nature cannot draw immediately on the divine attributes of the second person but must learn to depend on the work of the Trinitarian God as mediated to the

created realm by the Spirit. So He must be filled with the Spirit, guided by the Spirit, and taught to depend upon the Spirit.

In one sense, this is entirely consistent with the general Trinitarian principle that governs God's relationship to the created realm—the Spirit is seen as the direct agent of, and in, creation. Christ's human nature is a creature; thus, the Spirit is the medium by which God acts upon it. This is not exceptional at all. In another sense, however, given Christ's existence as the incarnation of the Logos, we witness in the Spirit's ministry to Him an exceptional and unique role, given the uniqueness of the person and the mission involved.

This is a theological point that also has obvious practical implications. If Christ Himself, the incarnate Son of God, is dependent upon the Spirit, how much more should the church, corporately and individually, also be self-consciously dependent upon the same? The move from the history of salvation in Christ to the reality and experience of salvation in the church and the individual believer is thus a smooth and inevitable one. Further, the church is constituted by the indwelling of the Spirit through the Word. Like the human nature of Christ, she has no existence as the church prior to or outside of that relationship. Thus, she also needs to learn to be utterly dependent on the Spirit for guidance and strength. This safeguards the centrality of the Word, given that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and roots the imperative of prayer in the indicative work of Christ as both paradigm and the One who has Himself prayed to the Father to send the Spirit.

Dramatic movement in Christ's life

The second advantage of Owen's approach is that it allows the preacher to do justice to the dramatic movement of Christ's life. The Gospels essentially tell the story of how the Logos humbled Himself to take human flesh. Anyone who preaches texts such as Luke 2:52 is going to be faced with questions from thoughtful congregants concerning how such verses can be reconciled with a robust doctrine of Christ as the incarnation of the transcendent God.

There are two obvious, and obviously inadequate, responses. One is that God is Himself transformed in the Incarnation, that the Logos becomes less than God as He is united with human flesh. Yet if Christ is less than

God, He cannot save. Further, such a change would raise serious questions about the reliability of the revelation embodied in Christ: if Christ is God manifest in the flesh, yet that God is somehow fundamentally less than God as He is in Himself, what kind of revelation is He? Such a view is lethal not only to salvation but to revelation as well.

The other inadequate response is to make the teaching of these verses merely docetic: for example, Christ only appears to grow in knowledge. Thus, when He wanders into Joseph's workshop, sees His earthly father using a chisel for the first time, and asks him what he is using, He is only pretending not to know in order to give an appearance of genuine humanity. Because He is God, and God presumably knows what a chisel is, the question is merely a piece of playacting. Such an approach does obvious violence to texts in Luke, but also empties a verse like Hebrews 5:8 of meaning.

Such an approach would also render the overall work of Christ to be one that is primarily didactic. Christ becomes a great example; the outward pattern of His deeds and sayings, not the constitution of His person, would be essential for understanding His work. Christ would be merely a great teacher. In fact, one might even raise the question of why it would be necessary for such a Christ to be a historical figure at all. Could not the work of a docetic Christ be done just as easily by a character in one of Aesop's fables? Clearly the biblical testimony demands a far different Christology.

Christ's growth in knowledge, like the temptations in the wilderness, the struggle in Gethsemane, and the agony of the cross, is real and an essential part of His work of salvation. It is not merely an inspiring story; neither is it the historical account of a mere man. At the center of the gospel is the Christ of the Gospels and of Philippians 2. The preacher must make that point without compromising either the Bible's doctrine of God or the Bible's narrative account of Christ.

Owen's Christology offers the preacher a way forward here. While there is often an impatience among preachers with systematic theology and particularly with some of the apparently more abstract concepts with which it operates, it should be clear from the above that such can actually help. The preacher without a fine grasp of Chalcedonian theology is likely to be doomed to commit again and again the christological heresies of the first four centuries. However, the preacher who has read Owen on

the Incarnation is well equipped to do justice to Scripture's teaching in a manner that avoids elementary theological blunders.

The humanity receives its personhood or its subsistence from its union with the Logos, but the divine attributes are not communicated directly to the human nature. Instead, the human nature can receive knowledge through empirical means—education, observation, experience—and through the work of the Holy Spirit mediating such knowledge to the nature. Christ really learns obedience as an incarnate person because the human nature grows, develops, and learns throughout His earthly life. Christ really feels the devil's temptation because His humanity does not enjoy full access to divine power simply by virtue of the union. Christ's life is marked by prayer because, as a human, He, too, is dependent on God and demonstrates that dependence by constantly calling on the Father for help and assistance.

Owen's view of the Incarnation, of the anhypostatic human nature of Christ, and of the role of the Holy Spirit allow for a rich, dynamic, and Trinitarian foundation for preaching the texts that speak of Christ growing, learning, being tempted, and suffering.

Conclusion

Geoff Thomas belongs to a generation of preachers for whom there was no opposition between the great doctrinal constructions of systematic theology and the exposition of the biblical text. Sadly, the fragmentation of the theological discipline, the professionalized detachment of systematic theology and biblical exegesis from the life of the church, and the perennial human impatience with systems as cages that inhibit our creativity have all conspired to make sure that many preachers have an instinctive suspicion of anything that smacks of system or speculation. That is unfortunate. The Bible is not the assorted reflections of numerous individuals and communities on their religious experience; it is the revelation of the one God who is Himself truth and who has revealed Himself truly. That does not mean that there is no element of mystery in that revelation or that the whole can be safely comprehended in some set of finite categories, but it does mean that there is a consistency to the revelation that can find its expression in what we call systematic theology. Such theology arises out of the testimony of

Scripture as a whole and then regulates the interpretation of any particular passage or set of passages. The Gospel narratives in connection with the doctrine of God are perhaps only the most obvious of these.

I hope that what I have sketched briefly above reveals the usefulness of classical systematic categories, not in inhibiting the preacher in his exposition of the drama of the Gospel texts, but actually in enhancing it. Geoff Thomas has spent his life doing so. Here are the outlines of the conceptual foundations that will enable subsequent preachers to maintain this faith once for all delivered to the saints.