

Recovering the Priority of Personal Holiness

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The Word of God is the means employed by the Holy Spirit to transform us into the image of Christ, so if preaching and evangelism are to be effective, private communion with God in His Word must be more important than discovering the latest ministry technique. Owen wrote that “whatever else be done in churches, if the pastors of them, or those who are so esteemed, are not exemplary in gospel obedience and holiness, religion will not be carried on and improved among the people” (Works, vol. 16, p. 88).

Yet holiness isn't just a necessity for ministers. If the church is to recover its distinctiveness, holiness is a requirement for each individual member. [Hebrews 12:14](#) says, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” Unless we recover this emphasis on holiness, how will th “If the Word does not dwell with power in us,” wrote Puritan John Owen, “it will not pass with power from us” (The Works of John Owen, vol. 16, p. 76.). This godly minister personified this truth in his personal life and public ministry more than three centuries ago. For years he carried the message of Jesus Christ into the trenches of a culture as chaotic as our own while simultaneously dealing with the death of his wife and all eleven of his children. John Owen was no ivory tower theologian, but rather a zealous pastor who worked to the brink of exhaustion to further the work of the Reformers. He is remembered for shining gospel light into the spiritually dark arenas of politics and academia. And his love of Scripture was clearly and forcefully articulated from the variety of pulpits into which God called him.

Yet what gave John Owen success in ministry was not so much his oratory skill, nor his evangelistic zeal, nor even his love for the people he shepherded. John Owen was used mightily by God in all these ways because he was a man characterized by personal holiness. And in an age when the church is emulating the world, where it is no longer distinguishable from our pleasure-oriented culture, the example of John Owen shines like a beacon on a stormy night.

Let's consider whether we have allowed contemporary culture to infiltrate our minds and hearts. Have we inverted Christ's desire that the church be in the world by bringing the world into the church instead? If we take an honest look, perhaps we'll discover that we are contributing to this trend. Rather than relying solely on the sufficiency of God's Word, are we employing counselors in our churches who apply worldly methods of psychological analysis to address felt needs? Have we adopted worldly means to reach the seekers who sit skeptically in the back pews rather than offering them the truths of the Gospel and the Christian life? Faithful teaching of God's Word is vanishing. Are we among the number that have replaced preaching with elaborate drama productions aimed at entertaining? In terms of covenantal relationships, the rate of divorce and remarriage reflects societal statistics. Where do we stand on this issue? The church has become tolerant of all kinds of biblical compromise, casting aside principles that Owen and his contemporaries would have given their lives to protect and defend.

Unlike Owen, we are in danger of falling prey to the belief that without entertainment and other-worldly concessions, no one will want what Jesus offers. Let's not forget the exchange, in the nineteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel, between Jesus and the rich young ruler when Jesus told the man the realities of true discipleship. As the rich man realized that personal sacrifice is required to live in God's kingdom, he walked away. What did Jesus do? He did not do what many churches do today: run after the man in an effort to make the Gospel more appealing. No, Jesus let him go, because the only terms on which anyone can truly follow Christ are God's terms.

Owen engaged the culture without capitulating to it because his chief desire was to reflect God's purity in his life and ministry. He remained faithful in his preaching to the truths of Scripture — even in the face of life-threatening persecution — because of his commitment to holiness. People flocked to hear Owen preach because he reflected God's character. Owen wrote, as noted in Peter Toon's book *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen*: "I hope I may own in sincerity that my heart's desire unto God, and the chief design of my life ... are, that mortification and universal holiness may be promoted in my own life and in the hearts and ways of others, to the glory of God, so that the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ may be adorned in all things" (p. 56).

I fear that personal holiness is not a priority within the church — even among its leaders — as it was in the days of the Puritans. Many ministers are often nowadays more concerned with visual growth and success than with cultivating personal purity. That was certainly not the case with John Owen. Rather than devoting much time to developing innovative amusements for the worship hour, Owen made private communion with God a top priority.

He understood why the apostle Paul wrote: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will” ([Rom. 12:2](#)). T e world look in and be able to see the Jesus we profess? Evangelistic efforts will ring hollow if such efforts are not accompanied by personal purity.