

THE SPIRIT OF LOVE

William Law on: *the way through controversy*

Feeling out of step with the church of which one is a signed-up member is no new phenomenon. Probably sooner or later most believers have a taste of it as it would seem to be an inevitable concomitant of the sin of Christian disunity. The current situation in worldwide Anglicanism is a vivid case in point and is acutely painful for those involved. History can help to give guidelines, not by providing infallible answers but rather by encouraging hope and perseverance. Fidelity to the gospel truth is vital together with the ability to stay with confusion until a God-willed way forward is clearly given, both on the individual and corporate levels. Above all there must not be a failure in love. That is axiomatic. Anything that is of and from God cannot but be carried out in love.

The late 17th and 18th century Non-Jurors in the Church of England¹ are pointers on the way, as much for the holiness of their lives as by their writings. William Law, priest, 1686-1761, is no exception. Best known for his devotional/ascetical work "*A Serious Call to the Devout and Holy Life*", Law is perhaps more significant for today in his later mystical and more speculative theosophical writings, "*The Spirit of Prayer*"; "*The Spirit of Love*", etc. These are the fruit of mature reflection during his time of prayerful seclusion and accompanying charitable works in the second half of his life. By then he had nothing to lose, from the angle of preferment, in an established church to which he remained faithful despite his estrangement. He could afford to point out her shortcomings, as well as those of the churches in general, made up as they were of disunited believers who had often lost sight of the true nature of Christian love and God's redemptive purposes for a fallen, sinful world.

William Law found an echo of his own concerns in the halting attempts of the mystics to speak of the God of infinite love who nevertheless is a God of justice and in his unutterable holiness can have no truck with evil. How reconcile the so-called 'wrath' of God with his mercy? How fathom the depths of predestination to salvation, or damnation in a world that anyway seemed

to be hurtling towards destruction? The German Lutheran, Jacob Boehme, in the spirit of the third century Origen, offered a glimmer of light which inspired Law, like some others of his time. Fears of heretical teaching on this score, voiced by the more timid, did not deter Law, for again he had nothing to lose. Boehme's insights in fact open us up to the inter-faith concerns of our present era, to the glimpsed awareness that at the level of profound prayer the mysticisms of the great world religions draw us deeper into the mystery of Oneness, of God's ultimate purposes of cosmic unity, in Christ. Whatever uncomfortable things might be happening around us then that reality remains unshakeable.

In a Church and world where we are consistently at one another's throats we need to know that our God is **not** a God of partiality, of moody petulance against those who offend him so as to thrust them into everlasting torment. With a completely orthodox stress on the impassibility of God, Law says of such a concept:

“God, considered in Himself, is as infinitely separate from all possibility of doing hurt or willing pain to any creature as He is from a possibility of suffering pain or hurt from the hand of a man.”

(“The Spirit of Prayer” 1749-50)

However, the enigma of sin and the fall did come about and Scripture actually speaks of the wrath of God against all wickedness and therefore, as our human reasoning sees it, against sinners themselves. Wrath suggests punishment. Is God therefore an autocrat, a cruel punisher? Like Boehme, Law does not in fact deny ‘wrath’ in God. At the very centre of His being, in itself an area of absolute freedom, this ‘wrath’, the source of evil, violence etc is imprisoned (evil **has** in some indescribable way to originate in God otherwise we have dualism and God cannot be truly omnipotent). But this ‘wrath’ is restrained and controlled always by God's goodness and love, which is his real nature. This place of the ‘*fire of wrath*’ is the place of the holding together of conflicts – a tension which resolves by balancing. This is true ultimately of all life, of humanity itself, Boehme claims.

But with the fall, of angels then of humans, this ‘wrath’ as it were was released – sin and evil seem to have taken over, chaos and confusion abound. It can scarcely be denied that the world

is full of violent disorder, and, if we are honest, so are our own hearts too, but for the grace of God.

That grace of course is the whole point. Creation/Fall/Redemption are mysteriously all of a piece, all contemporaneous. There never was a moment actually when God's will to save was not at work. The book of Genesis tells us as much (Genesis 3¹⁴⁻¹⁵). The Seed of the Woman is to crush the head of the Serpent, i.e. Jesus, the divine Seed of Mary, the Woman and descendant of Eve, is to overcome the Serpent – the devil. Law speaks often of Jesus as the “*Serpent-Bruiser*”. The Incarnate Word is God's visible, tangible expression of the divine impossibility “*of doing hurt or willing pain*”, in that he took it upon himself.

In his “*Appeal*” (to all who doubt or disbelieve the truths of the Gospel)” written in 1740 Law speaks at length about the “wrath” that was released at the fall, assuring us that it was not ultimately willed by God and certainly not delighted in by Him:

“The wrath that was awakened at the fall of man was only a plague or evil or curse that sin had brought forth It was such a wrath that God Himself pitied man's lying under it was not a wrath that was according to the mind, will, and liking or wisdom of God; it was such a wrath as God Himself hated, as He hates sin and hell [and that He] so willed to be removed and extinguished, that, ... He sent His only begotten Son into the world that all mankind might be saved and delivered from it.”

If God Himself thus hates the turmoil and awfulness of sin and goes to such lengths to overcome it, how much more must **we** hate that sin and wrathful confusion in ourselves, our world, our church and all our relationships. We too must ‘hold it in’, ‘resolve tensions’, live with the contradictions without exploding. Under God it is and must be possible. This **is** redemption in our present time and place, to be completed fully only when our earthly struggle is over. This is what our fidelity to God and the faith is about and for:

“Turn away from wrath of every kind [from the devil]. Whether you look at rage and anger in a tempest, a beast or a man, it is but one and the same thing, from one and the

same cause ... And this must be, till the centre of nature is again in its place of hiddenness [i.e. in that inner centre of God as glimpsed by Boehme – see above. See also James 3⁶ for the centre or wheel of nature] by being wholly overcome by Heaven.
(From the treatise “*Divine Knowledge*”)

So it is imperative that in times of strife and contention in the Church we should not permit ourselves to be sucked into the bitterness of discord and thus give free play to the divisive tactics of the evil one:

“Enter into no strife or self-defence against anyone that either reproaches you or your doctrine; but remember that, if you are to join with Christ in doing good, your sword of natural wrath must be locked up in its own sheath ... Work only in the meekness and sweetness of the Lamb of God.” (Ibid)

Love **has** to rule as William Law reiterates time and again:

“All religion is the spirit of love; all its gifts and graces are the gifts and graces of love Love breathes the Spirit of God Love is of no sect or party; it neither makes nor admits of any bounds It lives in the liberty, the universality, the impartiality of Heaven. It believes in one holy, catholic God And is meek, patient and well-wishing ... over all the evil that is in nature and creature Love is quite pure; it has no by-ends ... it has but one will, and that is to give itself into everything and overcome all evil with good. Lastly, love is the Christ of God ... the salvation ... the true Church of God, where the life of God is found and lived.”

(From the conclusion of “*The Spirit of Prayer*”)

These same themes are explored in yet greater depth in the slightly later treatise “*The Spirit of Love*” (Part 1, 1752; Part 2, 1754). Here the author says something of the cost of such love. We cannot embrace it and live in and by it simply because we discover it by hearsay, or even because we are deeply attracted by it. No, as the pearl of great price it will cost us everything.

Mere sentimentality about it hinders rather than helps. Theophilus, the master in the discourse, tells Eusebius his disciple:

“You must give up all that you are, and all that you have from fallen Adam, for all that you are and have from him is that life of flesh and blood which cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.”

It is here that William Law begins to show something of his growing understanding of the universality of redemption, themes very much to the fore in current Christian approaches to interfaith dialogue. The ‘Bruiser of the Serpent’ of Genesis 3, the ‘Incorruptible Seed of the Word’ first hinted at there – the Incarnate Son – was implanted in human nature precisely then, at the moment of the fall. That invitation to salvation thence became an integral part of human nature itself despite the grossness of sin. Thus salvation **is** possible for all, depravity is not absolute:

“Adam after his Fall had nothing that was good in him, nothing that could inherit an eternal Life in Heaven, but [i.e. except] the Bruiser of the Serpent, or the Seed of the Son of God that was reserved and treasured up in his soul.”

Thus we may not condemn one another to perdition even under the guise of seemingly biblical doctrines of election and rejection. William Law brilliantly shows us that such a division actually cuts right through each of us **individually** – the good in us being destined for salvation and the evil to destruction because of the seed of the Word of God at the centre of our nature:

“Nothing is reprobated, rejected or cast out by God but the earthly nature which came from the fall of Adam. This is the only vessel of wrath, the son of perdition that can have no share in the promises and blessings of God. [divine election and reprobation] relates not to any particular number of people or division of mankind but solely to the two natures that are both of them without exception in every individual of mankind ...

Election therefore and reprobation, as respecting salvation, equally relate to every man in the world; because every man as such has that in him which only is elected and that in him which only is reprobated, namely the earthly nature and the heavenly Seed of the Word of God.”

This personal, individual propensity for redemption, this ‘equal opportunity’, is there for **everyone** from the beginning to the end of time. Who then are we to blame and condemn? God alone is judge:

“From the moment of man’s redemption, which began at the fall ... every Son of Adam, to the end of the world, must come into it, under one and the same election and reprobation with regard to God.”

There cannot and must not then be any room for unlove amongst us, especially among professing Christians, no blaming and condemning, no unchurching of one another. How good and lovely a thing if only brothers and sisters did dwell together in unity despite their differences! Christ prayed for it and died for it. The seeds of possibility are there in us all so let us **not** give place to the evil one. William Law encourages us, so let us set ourselves to the task:

“Through all the universe of things, nothing is uneasy, unsatisfied or restless but because ... it has not reached or attained the full birth of the Spirit of Love. For when that is done, every hunger is satisfied, and all complaining, murmuring, accusing, resenting, revenging, and striving are totally suppressed and overcome ... If you ask why the Spirit of Love cannot ... accuse, resent, murmur, it is because Divine Love desires nothing but itself ... it is its own good ... for Love is God, and he that dwelleth in God dwelleth in Love.”

How do we stand in the face of such a challenge, as William Law went on to ask his disciple Eusebius?

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