

JOHN OWEN, PIVOTAL CHURCHMAN

An Introduction to the Ecclesiology of John Owen

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Introduction

The Church of Jesus Christ has had a rough go of it in its twenty-century history. Though she has had no shortage of promise, grace, or faithfulness on the part of her Head and Good Shepherd, she has in her course down to modern times appeared confused, rebellious, disjointed, persecuted, persecuting, and promiscuous. Left to herself, of her own volition, she has displayed little other than weakness and sometimes glaring expressions of her members' depravity. A secular study of her history will not but leave one disillusioned and cynical as to her appointed mission. She seems all so often, as Israel, to have forgotten that it was her Lord "who gave her the grain, the new wine and the oil" (Hosea 2:8). Peter Lewis reflects:

If we are horrified at the state of the world in our generation, can we be less anxious about the state of the Church within that world? If the light that is in the world be darkness, how great is that darkness! And in a day when, in the very Church of God, we too often see law denegated, grace abused, truth neglected as "mere doctrine," and experience placed on a par with revelation, we have urgent need to ask (without fault) why "the former times were better than these."¹

¹ Peter Lewis, The Genius of Puritanism (Sussex: Carey Publications, 1975), p. 11.

But the Church's apparent failure is deceptive, for she has a Master whose purposes shall not be thwarted, and whose love for her is not wavering. Behind the course of her history, her Lord has been acting--accomplishing His designs, and in fact making her a blessing on earth. By His hand, she has preserved special revelation in the Bible, she has spread its good news throughout the earth, and to a degree has stemmed the tide of evil in the world. By her ministry, light has gone forth where there was but darkness, the result being that many men are delivered from death to eternal life. She has invented new kinds of good (tracable to the character of her Espoused) which have befitted mankind in many ways.

But what of this seeming paradox--a Church on the one hand hypocritical, intolerant, and far from attractive, and on the other hand the focus of the redeeming love and very handiwork (Philippians 1:6) of the sovereign Creator God? How can an organization claimed to have been instituted by God Himself possess both beauty and ugliness, both virtue and vice? We find the resolution in that the idea and existence of the Church (both universal and visible) are not man-made, but were in fact originated by God in His Son Jesus Christ. A guidebook was given for the operation and maintenance of the Church, containing all the necessary data. It has been the Church's responsibility to implement the data true to the form in which it was given, meaning that the Church is to be run on the basis of the Bible. But this has taken many interpretations and leads us to the

Christian situation today, with many groups of many different ideologies all claiming the correct interpretation of Scripture. While it is not the task of this paper to survey the broad realm of developmental ecclesiology, it is sufficient to say that the study of ecclesiology (Scriptural and historical) should be a high priority among Christians. Indeed, as Dr. Jack Arnold says,

After one has nailed down his theology of salvation and Christian living, the next most important subject to master is the study of the Church. The tragedy is that most Christians have never really bothered to study the subject at all. They have no real convictions as to whether the congregational, episcopalian, or presbyterian forms of government are right or wrong. The result of all of this is that Christians are attempting to run the churches diametrically opposed to what the Bible teaches, which often leads to tyrannical dictators as pastors or congregations where anarchy reigns.²

Even a brief study of the history of the Church though, will reveal that she has seen great victories and experienced God-sent revivals. Among the most influential (particularly to the American Church) and interesting of the Church's peoples are the English Puritans. Defining the words "Puritan" or "Puritanism" is not simple. Various national, political and social elements were involved with the times, and their Christian lives were not solely religion-centered. They lived in 16th and 17th century England, a complex and quickly changing era. Peter Lewis encapsulates the essence of the movement:

² Jack L. Arnold, "The First Pastor's Conference, Act 20:13-17," Acts, Lesson 49, unpublished sermon notes, Grace Church (Roanoke:1979) p. 1.

we may say that essential Puritanism grew out of three great areas: the New Testament pattern of personal piety, sound doctrine, and a properly ordered Church-life . . . mingling and blending together.³

(Further historical background will be sketched in the following section). From among the ranks of the English Puritans (which includes such notables as John Bunyan, Thomas Brooks, Thomas Manton, and Thomas Goodwin) John Owen (1616-1683) has emerged as a pivotal thinker in Protestant theology. Indeed, he is thought by some (Roger Nichole and J. I. Packer, among others) to be the greatest British theologian of all time. His published works today encompass 24 large volumes representing 86 treatises and sermon collections. According to the arrangement of volumes in the Goold edition, the works are divided into five main divisions: (1) Doctrinal, (2) Practical, (3) Controversial, (4) Historical, and (5) Exegetical.⁴ The jacket of the Banner of Truth reprint of Volume 13 phrases well the subject matter of this paper, to be discussed within the overall context of the question "what is the Church and what exactly is its nature?"

A perennial concern of John Owen throughout his literary career was the subject of the Church. Thus it is not surprising that four volumes . . . of his works are devoted to the field. In this respect, Owen was a typical Puritan, for his zeal for sound doctrine and

³ Lewis, op. cit.

⁴ The Works of John Owen, ed. W. H. Goold (16 vols.; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), pp. 547, 548. The Goold Edition does not contain Volume 17 (an untranslated Latin work entitled "Treatise Relating to the History of Theology") or Volumes 18-24, the 7-volume commentary on Hebrews. References from The Works will hereafter be referred to as Works, Volume, Page.

piety was never divorced from a concern for the life and order of the Church.

In the Heat of the Forge

Examination of any great ecclesiastic requires first some understanding of the historical context in which he lived. John Owen, living through most of the 17th century, knew a time not far removed from the great Protestant Reformers. Scarcely 90 years before his birth, England not only knew no Presbyterians, Congregationalists, or Baptists, but was itself still thoroughly Roman Catholic. But being an island state, she was always a bit hard to control all the way from Rome. During the years 1529-1536, her relationship with Rome was completely severed by King Henry VIII, and the Protestant Church of England was founded. Henry, however, was always doctrinally Catholic (the eventual break with Rome was political rather than theological), and he even earned the title "Defender of the Faith," given to him by Pope Leo X, for attacking Luther's newly "discovered" (or rather, recovered) doctrines. But the break, when it did come, was to remain final, for most of the subsequent monarchs (excepting Mary Tudor) had little interest in coming under Roman influence again. Also, by 1563, the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England were finalized and at least provided a workable starting point for further reformation of the Church in England. There was in the long run to be little real change within the Church of England even with strictly Protestant Articles; and soon there grew more and more feelings of dissent within the Anglican

family. The founding of Presbyterianism in Scotland, and the doctrine brought back from the mainland (Dutch & Swiss Calvinism, Anabaptist ideas, etc.) coupled to begin to make England fertile ground for new church groups. The emphases of Puritanism began to catch on in the minds of many, and by the time of Owen's birth, Presbyterianism was solidly entrenched as a permanent alternative to Anglicanism in England.

A period of extraordinary unrest and confusion (not at all unfamiliar in the 15th to 17th centuries) began in 1625 with the ascension to the English throne of Charles I. While the reign between Henry VIII and Charles I (Edward VI, Mary Tudor excepted, Elizabeth I, and James I) all seemed to lack any eagerness to return to Catholicism, such an event would never have displeased Charles I too much. He had little favor or trust for Presbyterians or Puritans. David Willson relates a further development, illustrating some of the issues:

Meanwhile a new form of ecclesiastical government--that of the Independents--emerged in England. The Independents had begun in the reign of Elizabeth when a group of religious radicals, the Brownists or Separatists, broke from the church and set up their own congregations. The churches in New England and some English churches in Holland were of this type. They rejected any kind of ecclesiastical hierarchy, whether Anglican or Presbyterian. Each congregation, they believed, should be complete, autonomous, and sovereign in itself. Uncontrolled from above, it should elect its own minister and should determine its own beliefs and ritual. The Independents laid great stress on individual interpretation of the Scriptures and believed that man could discover God's will as well as find a guide of conduct in the Bible. . . . Hence the Independents believed in new revelations, new directives to be found in God's written word. The result was great diversity

of doctrine and a great variety of sects--Congregationalists, Anabaptists, Antinomians, Fifth Monarchy Men, Quakers, and, to the far left, the Diggers, who rejected church buildings and all ritual and made religion a silent communion of the spirit between God and man.⁵

So, the situation in England was rapidly exploding with zeal for religious freedom. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) was a key figure in the setting of this tone among his countrymen. Then, as a result of many different factors, civil war broke out between the Parliamentary forces and those forces loyal to Charles I. It was a long (1642-1649) and complicated war, and the main military force fighting for Parliament was Cromwell's New Model Army. Maurice Ashley, Oxford historian and historical assistant to Sir Winston Churchill, has the following to say about the Army:

In the New Model Army, nearly every variety of the Christian faith (apart from Roman Catholicism) was to be found . . . Active discussions took place in camp on such subjects as church and state democracy, free grace and free will. Cromwell thought that varied opinions on these topics ought to be allowed. That did not mean to say that he was ceasing to be a true Calvinist who believed in the doctrine of election by grace. But each Christian man and woman, lit by the faith and hope that is inspired by an intimate relationship with God, should, he felt, have the right to seek him after his own fashion. The troop that formed a gathered church, or the congregation that wished to be left alone to worship under its own chosen minister, was to him equally worthy of protection. Independency, of which he was the secular leader, defended the right of any society of godly persons to meet and pray without interference from the state. In essence it was a doctrine of liberty of conscience. Its advocates, therefore, urged that any church organization now set up in place of episcopacy should have the minimum of coercive power

⁵ David Harris Willson, A History of England (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967) p. 407.

and should not constitute an exclusive establishment. To Independents, the conscience was sacrosanct; they recognized that "man is bound to God by individual ties which the state can neither cement nor loosen." The only limit upon toleration within the Puritan fold that Cromwell and the Independents were prepared to admit was that the public peace must not be disrupted by enthusiasts.⁶

With the final defeat of Charles in 1649, the Independent constituents of the Army dispersed, thus taking their various ecclesiastical concepts with them. As these different ideas matured, however, their particulars were not necessarily in alignment among groups. Indeed, bitternesses and a new intolerance were spawning. As Peter Toon notes, "strict Presbyterians and Independents were forgetting Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 13 concerning charity."⁷ A state of flux followed, during the Protectorate of Cromwell and well into the Restoration of Charles II (1660), during which discussion and fellowship among Independents were frequent. But, as men would seemingly have it, reconciliation and merger among these Christians was not to be.

The last 40 years of the century were also troubled somewhat with neo-catholic endeavors on the part of Charles II (though not so intolerant as was his father, Charles I) and to a degree under James II. Persecutions of Independents once again occurred, as

⁶ Maurice Ashley, The Greatness of Oliver Cromwell (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1957) pp. 173, 174.

⁷ Peter Toon, God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen, (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1971) p. 22. This is the most comprehensive and informative biography of Owen readily available today. It blends the biographical data with the theological background necessary to an understanding of the significance of Owen.

they had under the short reign of Mary Tudor. On October 26, 1687, the Axminster Independent Church made the decision to carefully chronicle (occasioned by and preceded six months earlier by James II's Declaration of Indulgence), their corporate experiences as a struggling dissenting church. The work is still in print, and although the author is unknown, it is a marvelous and highly representative document of the affairs of one Independent church between the years 1660 and 1698. The following are a few brief bits from The Axminster Ecclesiastica:

On a solemn day [in 1660] of prayer and supplication, voluntarily giving up themselves to the Lord and to each other by the will of God, solemnly covenanting and engaging to walk together in a due and faithful attendance upon the Lord Jesus Christ in all His ordinances and appointments, and in the faithful discharge of all those duties relating to the members of a church of Christ, so were embodied and constituted a church of Christ. Being thus united and brought into one body, presently Mr. Bartholemew Ashwood was chosen by them to be their pastor, . . . was ordained, and set apart for the pastoral office in this little sister church whose foundation was now laid, the number of names being but few, about twelve or thirteen.⁸

Persecution of Independents was not uncommon:

The year 1664. The persecution waxed hotter, and greater bonds were prepared for the people of God, such as kept themselves faithful and separated from the corruptions of the day in matters of God's worship, both ministers and people. . . . Now where ministers were most public in their preaching work, there the adversity was most raging, endeavoring to suppress the preaching of the gospel and to hinder its progress. But ah! how vain were all their attempts. The Lord raised up the hearts of a people to bear their testi-

⁸ Ed. : K. W. H. Howard, The Axminster Ecclesiastica, 1660-1698, (W. Yorks: Gospel Tidings Publications, 1976 annotated reprint of 1874 edition), pp. 10, 11.

mony to His truth and gospel in the face of dangers, insomuch that the prisons were filled apace both with ministers and people.⁹

In these times, the Independents loved their minister and elders:

On the 24th day of the 9th month in this year (1693), it pleased to Lord to remove by death Thomas Lane, who had been a member of this congregation almost from the very first rise and constitution of this church, and has served in the office of a ruling elder from a time after their first embodying. . . . He was a faithful and beloved brother indeed, who in his day passed along through many sore and sharp storms of persecution, and bore the shocks of tribulation with invincible courage. . .¹⁰

The mottos "sola scriptura" and "sola fide" were now in England to stay. By 1700, a hard fought-for liberty of religion had been won. But with that liberty, and with the name of Christ now being heralded by men of different creeds, the Church again faced the matter of defining itself from the Scriptures, and seeking to understand what its government should be, what its people should do, and what its message should be. In short, the theological realm of ecclesiology needed new and more biblical development. It was to this task that John Owen's heart and mind were given.

Between the Hammer and the Anvil

If one studies the standard evangelical church histories, he will be hard pressed to find more than a mention of or at best a paragraph on John Owen. Indeed, rarely is much space given to

⁹ Ibid., pp. 25, 26.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 149.

the English Puritans as a group. For whatever reason(s), this is unfortunate, for their influence was not insignificant, nor were their ideas small.

But if one views the spectrum of church history through the viewfinder of historical theology, then the name of John Owen becomes more visible, particularly if one reads writers of the Reformed emphasis. Owen's father was an outspoken Puritan minister, of a strict Calvinistic soteriology, and while John was only three years old at the synthesis of the Canons of the Synod of Dort in 1619, the Reformed thrust and basic theology were very familiar in England, as can be seen in the Thirty-nine Anglican Articles. John grew up watching the seams of English life being ripped apart by the pulling of Puritans against royalist factions. He entered Queen's College, Oxford, at 12 years of age, and a life of study seemed well suited for him. But the circumstances would not allow a tranquil academic career. Archbishop William Laud had begun a bitter anti-Puritan purge of the churches and universities. In 1637, Owen left Oxford, as did other nonconformist Puritans, became a private chaplain in the home of a sympathetic nobleman. At the outbreak of the civil war in 1642, Owen was in London, and at its conclusion with the establishment of a Puritan government, an opportunity arose to pastor a church at Fordham in Essex. From there he took the job as minister to an influential congregation at Coggeshall. He also now had opportunities to preach before the assembled parlia-

ment (a concept unheard of today) on the monthly "fast days" in St. Margaret's Chapel, Westminster. Having become one of Cromwell's chief advisors, Owen was then appointed vice-chancellor at Oxford. While exhibiting skill at administration at the university, Owen had such students as Sir Christopher Wren, John Locke, William Penn, Philip Henry and Joseph Allieine.¹¹ At the restoration of Charles II in 1660, he was forced to leave Oxford, and threatened with arrest, was fortunate to find refuge with powerful friends. He was more than once tempted to accept offers to go to America, and to take the presidency of Harvard, and later the pulpit of a Boston church. But, guided by Providence, Owen knew that he was needed in England and played a large part as the most noteworthy nonconformist spokesman until his death in 1683. Allen Guelzo makes some interesting comments on the character of Owen's ministry and career:

It was acknowledged, even by Owen's enemies, that the Massachusetts offers were not idly made, for Owen's ministry and preaching were of a stature that demanded notice. Scholar though he was, Owen was thoroughly convinced of the primacy of biblical preaching over theological logic-chopping. . . . Even at a distance of three hundred years, Owen's intellect remains dazzling. He was only twenty-six when his first major book had brought him renown in London, and within five years Parliament was commissioning him to write theological pamphlets for national use. Owen was that rare

¹¹ At Oxford, Owen and Thomas Goodwin set up what might be regarded as the forerunner of the modern campus counseling center, which the undergraduates promptly labelled "the scruple shop." Allen C. Guelzo, "John Owen, Puritan Pacesetter," Christianity Today, (May 21, 1976).

thing, the preacher who could be scholarly without being pedantic.¹²

The most famous of his works, and probably the reformed statement of the doctrine of the Atonement, is The Death of Death in the Death of Christ (1647). It is a brilliant work, and is still widely referred to today. While Owen does write with a heavy style, J. I. Packer encourages us that "studying Owen is worth all the labor involved . . ." ¹³ and that his volume The Death of Death in the Death of Christ "will help us in one of the most urgent tasks facing Evangelical Christendom today--the recovery of the gospel."¹⁴ His writings as a whole covered many subjects. He explored the depths of the believer's experience and secrets of the heart in his treatises on indwelling sin, the mortification of sin, communion with God, temptation, the nature and cause of apostasy, and the Holy Spirit (which Charles Ryrie of Dallas Theological Seminary has described as a work that has never been superseded).¹⁵ He was not a figure in church history which we would want to paint as a transcendent sinless model (as biographers occasionally do with some people). The mere volume of his writings on the Christian life and the struggle with sin indicate rather a profound awareness of his unworthiness of

¹² Ibid., p. 15

¹³ James I. Packer, Introductory Essay to John Owen's The Death of Death in the Death of Christ (Wilmington (Delaware): Puritan Reformed), p. 25.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁵ Guelzo, op.cit.

Christ. His chief interest lay not in turning out neat little works of specialized scholarship but in pursuing personal holiness. One of the most beloved of Owen's works, his last, is Meditations on the Glory of Christ. It emphasizes the importance of fixing our eyes on Christ alone:

The revelation made of Christ in the blessed Gospel is for more excellent, more glorious, and more filled with rays of divine wisdom and goodness, than the whole creation and the just comprehension of it, if attainable, can contain or afford. Without the knowledge hereof, the mind of man, however priding itself in other inventions and discoveries, is wrapped up in darkness and confusion. This, therefore, deserves the severest of our thoughts, the best of our meditations and our utmost diligence in them. For if our future blessedness shall consist in being where He is, and beholding of His glory, what better preparation can there be for it than in a constant previous contemplation of that glory in the revelation that is made in the Gospel, unto this very end, that by a view of it we may be gradually transformed into the same glory.¹⁶

Having surveyed the historical setting in which John Owen lived, we must now move on to the primary subject of this paper, that being of his role in the hammering out of English Protestant ecclesiology. He was a creative writer and churchman, placing his thoughts on paper as he grew in Christ, but also wrote responsively to the questions and needs of the age. As noted, he lived in a particularly polemical age, coming on the English scene on the very heels of the Reformation. When he published his first book, even Anglicanism was barely a century old, and

¹⁶ Works, I, p. 275.

for many Christians, it hardly seemed the truly reformed church that they were looking for.

It has been said that if a man wants to make his career in the Church, he can choose between pastor and theologian, but should not expect to master both and should devote himself to one or the other. If this has been the rule (and we hope it has not), then John Owen provides a noteworthy exception. His theological works were many, using Scripture first, as well as logic and wit. But he was no ivory-tower scholar. The times simply would not allow it. Controversies raged on all sides, Owen entering into many of them. Not the least of these was the matter of ecclesiology. He had a true affection for the people of God, and desired to see them distinct and identifiable from the world, going further than most of his fellow Puritans in the practice of the "gathered" church (the local church being membered by believers only). It seems that it was a primary task of the 17th century to work on the matters of Biblical ecclesiology, both in England and in the English colonies in America. Some 26 of Owen's 86 published treatises relate to ecclesiology and spanned the period 1643 to his death in 1683, some being published posthumously (See Appendix). We will survey Owen's ecclesiology in three sections: (1) on matters of the local church, (2) on relations between local churches, and (3) on the Church's relation to the State.

Matters of the Local Church

During the 1600's due to the national conditions of the times, there was still much discussion by Protestants attempting to defend their existence as separated from the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁷ John Owen described the Church as related in Scripture in three ways. First, is the "mystical body of Christ," His elect, redeemed, justified and sanctified ones throughout the world--the "church catholic militant." Secondly, is the universality of men throughout the world called by the preaching of the Word of God, visibly professing and yielding obedience to the gospel, called "the church catholic visible." The third expression of God's people is seen in the "particular church," where the instituted worship of God in Christ is celebrated.¹⁸ The most definitive of Owen's writings on the particular, or local church, is The True Nature of a Gospel Church. In it he deals with the subjects of cause, rule, discipline, officers, pastors, teachers, and excommunication in the local church; and the matter of fellowship among churches.

As to the cause of a local church, or how Christians become a church, Owen describes it as a mutual confederation or solemn agreement to perform all the duties which the Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed for his disciples. He noted, "For the most part, the churches that are in the world at present know not how they

¹⁷ See Owen's writings in Works, XIV, Animadversions . . ., etc.

¹⁸ Works, XIII, pp. 124, 125.

came so to be, continuing in that state which they received by tradition from their fathers. Few there are who think that any act or duty of their own is required to instate them in church order and relation."¹⁹ Owen had little affection for the staleness accompanying the prevailing Catholic and Anglican concepts of church membership. He saw regeneration, and evidence thereof, as requisite to membership in any Biblical local church. Most Evangelicals today take this for granted, but in the 1600's it was by no means a foregone conclusion. (Indeed even today, it is a notion yet to be totally practiced in the Church). Having stated the "gathered" nature of the church, Owen further states that the formal cause of a church consists in an "obediential act of believers, in such members as may be useful unto the ends of church edification, jointly giving up of themselves unto the Lord Jesus Christ, to do all His commands."²⁰ Thus he sees as particularly important the deliberate and conscious covenanting of believers together. No aspect of the Christian's life is to be taken for granted. No element of Church life should be automatic or mechanistic. Church life is serious business and should entail a maximum of devotion, directly reflective of one's devotion to Christ Himself (II Corinthians 8:5). Also, it is implicit with Owen that Christians should have the freedom to gather

¹⁹ Works, XVI, p. 25.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

themselves in a church without having to gain the permission of any secular authorities. More will be said of this later.

Concerning the leaders in a local church, Owen had much to say. Today, the Congregationalist and the Presbyterian understandings of church leadership may be very different, but in Owen's mind the duties of officers in each were very similar. The rule of a church was granted by Christ for one purpose only, the ministry unto edification and authority of "usurpation of a dominion over the persons and consciences of the disciples of Christ"²¹ was never granted by Him, but was strictly forbidden (Luke 22:25, 26; Matthew 20:25-28). The wisdom needed to properly rule in a local church is a spiritual gift (I Corinthians 12:8), and is described by Owen as requiring (1) fervent prayer for it (2) diligent study of the Scripture (3) humble waiting on God (4) a conscientious exercise of received skills and talent and (5) a continual sense of the account which must be given to the Lord as Leaders.

Owen sees the officers as of two sorts: bishops (or elders, or overseers) and deacons. Bishops are of the ruling kind and of the pastor-teacher kind. He sees no room in Scripture for the idea of episcopacy, "consisting in a rank of persons distinct from the office of presbyters." The emphasis of the office of bishop should not be the jurisdiction, superiority or power over one another so much (though he recognizes this has often been the

²¹ Ibid., pp. 31, 32.

case in the history of the church), but in the fact that the office of bishop is a charge laid on a few for the care of souls, for nurturing and guiding believers and lending direction (Hebrews 13:17; I Peter 5:1-3). While administration needs to be attended to, the chief responsibility of bishops is to minister by various means. And there was to be a plurality of bishops (Philippians 1:1), and perhaps of pastors too.

It is significant to note Owen's own application to himself of the word "pastor" rather than "vicar" or "rector" as found most frequently used in those times. He saw himself as a shepherd to the faithful and an evangelist to the rest.²² The pastor then, was the first officer or bishop of the church, and is the primary one who feeds the flock. The metaphorical term "pastor," says Owen,

includes in it love, care, tenderness, and watchfulness, in all the duties of going before, preserving, feeding, defending the flock, the sheep and the lambs, the strong, the weak, and the diseased, with accountability, as servants, unto the Chief Shepherd. . . .²³

Further, the call to this office occupied Owen's attention (as it should ours), evidencing itself by spiritual gifts and abilities, compassion and love, continual watchfulness over the whole flock and in a zeal for the glory of God. The office of pastor or bishop were indeed high callings, not to be imparted on one's

²² Toon, op. cit., p. 17

²³ Works, XVI, p. 48.

self, but occupied only as "set apart thereunto according to the mind of Jesus Christ."²⁴ Owen wrote a separate work on pastoring called The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished, amplifying his thoughts on the relations of the shepherd to the flock, the calling, etc.

Concerning deacons, Owen states:

This office of deacons is an office of service, which gives not any authority or power in the rule of the church; but being an office, it gives authority with respect unto the special work of it, under a general notion of authority; that is, a right to attend unto it in a particular manner, and to perform the things that belong thereunto. But this right is confined unto the particular church whereunto they do belong. Of the members of that church are they to make their collections, and unto the members of that church are they to administer. Extraordinary collections from or for other churches are to made and disposed by the elders, Acts 11:30.²⁵

Owen goes on further to delineate deaconal duties as to free up pastors for labor in the word and doctrine, to care and provide for the poor in the church, providing for the place of church-assemblies, of the elements of the sacraments, and watching over the "stock" of the church, especially in times of trouble and persecution. They are obligated to attend the elders on all occasions, in a spirit of love and to receive instructions from them. In concluding his treatise on deacons, he has an unusual question/answer section, displaying an eminently practical view of the office of deacon.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

²⁵ Works, XVI, p. 147.

Other matters of particular concern to Owen were the right understanding of the "sacraments," which should be administered only in worthy manner, excommunication, to be carried out only on those who willfully deviate from the rules and laws of the Church (as found in Scripture); discipline, for the health of the body, and instructions in the worship of God, by catechism.

Owen's ecclesiology did not deal only with the more official matters of the local church, but included, as might be expected with a pastor, a concern for the proper practice of fellowship among the church's members. In his Eshcol, A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan is contained a section entitled "Mutual Duties in Church Fellowship," a marvelous display and explanation of some fifteen scriptural "rules" to be kept in mind by those who walk in fellowship. Rule VI is of particular interest, and is characteristic of Owen's philosophy of the ministry:

RULE VI. Frequent spiritual communication for edification, according to gifts received. EXPLICATION VI. That men not solemnly called and set apart to the office of public teaching may yet be endued with useful gifts of edification was before declared. The not using of such gifts, in an orderly way, according to the rule and custom of the churches, is to napkin up the talent given to trade and profit withal. That every man ought to labour that he may walk and dwell in knowledge in his family, none doubts. That we should also labour to do so in the church or family of God is no less apparent. Mal. 3:16; Job 2:11; Eph. 4:29; Col. 4:6; Eph. 5:4; I Thess. 5:11; Heb. 3:13; Jude 20; Heb. 10:24, 25; Acts 18:26; I Cor. 12:7.²⁶

²⁶ Works, XIII, pp. 69, 70.

Also, from his commentary on Hebrews, 10:25, "Exhorting one another":

All the duties of these assemblies, especially those which are useful and needful to prevent backsliding, and preserve from apostasy, are prepared under this one, which is the head and chief of them all. This then is the duty of all professors to the gospel, to persuade, to encourage, to exhort one another unto a constancy in profession, with resolution and fortitude of mind, against difficulties, dangers, and oppositions--a duty which persecution will teach them who intend not to learn anything of Christ.²⁷

Owen's perception of what the local church should be represented a radical return to purely New Testament ideas. Today, such a practice among evangelicals is commonplace (hopefully), but in his day, distinctions were not so clear. Liturgical worship flourished still and there was no abundance of reliable Systematic Theologies as there are today to help. Owen himself traversed from a committed Presbyterian understanding of Scripture to that of Independency and finally arriving at (and ending up as the most profound spokesman for) historic Congregationalism. This is significant, and marks a high point in Owen's growth. Toon tells us that "before the publication of his exposition of the limited atonement of Christ, Owen had finally adopted the Congregational way. In a rare autobiographical statement in a book published in 1657 he told his readers how he finally came to this position. Up to 1643 he had not examined the doctrines of the Church to a greater depth than 'an opposition to

²⁷ M. J. Tyron, Hebrews: The Epistle of Warning (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1968) p. 203. This is a one-volume abridgement of Owen's original seven-volume commentary on Hebrews.

Episcopacy and ceremonies' necessitated. But, as he explained:"²⁸

Not long after [the publication of The Duty of Pastors] I set myself seriously to inquire into the controversies then warmly agitated in these nations. Of the Congregational way I was not acquainted with any one person, minister, or other; nor had I to my knowledge, seen any more than one in my whole life. My acquaintance lay wholly with ministers and people of the Presbyterian way. But sundry books being published on either side, I perused and compared them with the Scripture and with one another according as I received ability from God. After a general view of them, as was my manner in other controversies, I fixed on one to take under peculiar consideration and examination, which seemed most methodically and strongly to maintain that which was contrary, as I thought, to my present persuasion. This was Mr. Cotton's [John] book of the Keys. The examination and confutation hereof, merely for my own particular satisfaction, with what diligence and sincerity I was able, I engaged in. What progress I made in that undertaking I can manifest unto any by the discourses on that subject and animadversions on that book yet abiding by me. In my pursuit and management of this work, quite beside and contrary to my expectation, at a time and season wherein I could expect nothing on that account but ruin in this world, without the knowledge or advice of, or conference with any person of that judgment, I was prevailed on to receive that and those principles which I had thought to have set myself in an opposition unto.²⁹

As to the particulars of the Congregational ecclesiology, Geoffrey Nuttall has written a delightful little book on the subject, and summarizes the "differentia" from other Reformed Churches (which almost all of the Independents of the period 1600 to 1660 were) as the following: (1) the principle of separation, that is, the establishment of independent churches, separated in

²⁸ Toon, op. cit., p. 27.

²⁹ Works, XIII, p. 223

order to a "positive fellowship; while the freedom still claimed within the fellowship was in order to foster the capacity of each and all to bear witness as 'visible saints.'"³⁰ Too much hierarchy, as could be found in some synods was undesirable, and the Congregational churches' separation from the Synods was criticized by some (i.e. Richard Baxter, who delineated ten specific points distinguishing Presbyterians and Congregationalists.)³¹ This idea was the root of religious freedom, and was cardinal to Congregationalism. The other general particular was what Nuttall calls "the principle of fitness,"³² whereby church membership is limited to "visible saints" (a characteristic Congregationalist expression), those who gave clear evidence and profession of regeneration.

These are all principles for which John Owen came to stand, and began to defend at every opportunity. We move now from within the confines of local churches to a brief consideration of Owen's burden and thoughts on the relation between churches.

Relations Between Local Churches

When one hears the word "toleration" in a religious context, one thinks most usually of the relations of some civil authority towards a religious group. The word has a much broader applica-

³⁰ Geoffrey F. Nuttall, Visible Saints: The Congregational Way, 1640-1660, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957) p. viii.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 100, 133.

³² Ibid., p. 131.

tion in 17th century England. Not only was toleration of non-Anglican by Anglican a desirable commodity, but within "evangelicalism" there was a sore need of it. The kind of Presbyterianism bred in Scotland, and now growing in England, which itself was legitimated only after a fight, was now finding itself unable to readily accept brethren of yet newer polities. As noted previously, Cromwell's influence went a long way in solidly entrenching new Independent groups. But as for unity, even among solidly Calvinistic brethren, there was little. It seems that uniformity in bibliology, Christology, and most clearly, soteriology was not enough to make brethren link arms for the sake of Christ and the Gospel. (Today unity among evangelicals seems to stand or fall more often on matters of bibliology or eschatology, but then soteriology was largely used as a test of orthodoxy). John Owen attended to these problems often during his career, particularly after 1660 (to 1683) when he was for the most part thrust out of the political picture at the Restoration. Again, Toon provides a helpful note:

What Owen wrote thus reveals to what extent the Puritan movement, which had such a proud history in Essex, has been fragmented by the pressures of war and the liberty that accompanied it. His paragraphs also show that he was deeply troubled about this situation which brought dishonor to Christ; and he desperately hoped to be able to pacify his brethren. He believed that the situation was being aggravated by the efforts of some Presbyterians to produce signatures for petitions to be sent to Westminster. These petitions called for full implementation of Presbyterian discipline at the parish level

within the framework of the recent legislation for a Presbyterian National Church.³³

Owen began thinking towards possible merger of Presbyterian and Congregationalist groups, to say nothing of the newly commenced Baptist "movement." He met with fellow ministers (his discussions with Richard Baxter are particularly interesting) and sought to persuade them that the Congregational idea of a fellowship of independent churches could work in the parish situation. But beyond the church government issue, there lay seemingly irreconcilable differences in eschatology (a new area of disagreement) and toleration. Throughout the war, he expounded the Congregational understanding, but grew in fervor for toleration. Toon notes that his proposals were designed to achieve maximum cooperation between Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists in preparation for the time when, in the coming millenium, denominational differences would be irrelevant.³⁴ How ahead of his time (and perhaps ours) he was! Yet it seemed that sectarianism among Protestants, and even among Reformed churches was to stay.

Even in America where everything was fresh and unstained, the Congregationalists displayed little tolerance for new Baptist groups. Toon relates that on May 28, 1665, a Baptist Church was formed at Boston which admitted into membership people excommunicated by the State (Congregational) Church. The General Court

³³ Toon, op.cit., p. 22.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 84, 85.

become afraid that matters might grow from small beginnings into a new "Münster tragedy" and so they passed various laws for the restraint of Baptists. These proved to be an embarrassment to the Nonconformists in Old England. Owen wrote two letters, exhorting the Governor and church of Massachusetts to toleration, but unfortunately they produced no immediate relaxation of the laws.³⁵ Such is the nature of the hearts of men, often even among Christians, characterized by what Dr. Jack Arnold has called the "religious-dogmatic mind."

But Owen would not give up. As late as 1680, he was discussing with Thomas Jollie possible unity of Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Neither did he turn his back on John Bunyan, imprisoned for his Baptist non-conformity, but tried to secure his release from prison. In summary, Owen simply would not be affected by the highly sectarian attitudes of the times. In this he was unusual, and worthy of study, for unity among Christians--knowing how to fellowship across convictions, how to cooperate in ministry for the sake of the Gospel, and when, if necessary, and over what issues to separate--is a kind of maturity and spiritual wisdom rare in our own times.

The final area of consideration proceeds from the doctrine of the local church and churches in fellowship: the question of the relationship between church and civil authority.

³⁵ Peter Toon, The Correspondence of John Owen (1616-1883), (Greenwood (South Carolina): The Attic Press, Inc., 1970), pp. 145, 146.

The Church's Relation to the State

It seems that religion is largely yawned at in America today. As previously alluded to, this was not the case in the earliest years of our nation--indeed up until Reconstruction. Zeal for proper church-life and the expansion of Christianity was not lacking in New England in the late 1600's, and by the time of the Revolution, the idea of religious freedom (and, by the way, all freedom) was not a "compromisable." It is not difficult to trace these convictions among New-Worlders back across the Atlantic to their spawning grounds in England. Those privileges which we enjoy today--freedom to worship when, where, and as we please, or indeed, whether to worship at all or not (practical atheism is a state privilege in the West), were won in 17th century England.

In the debates of nonconformists with traditionalists, John Owen was a prominent figure. While certainly not an advocate of strict secular (or ungodly) civil government, he did, with many references to past history, try to show that persecution of people who hold erroneous opinions has never achieved any lasting good. In this, Owen lined up with Cromwell (see Page 7) and with soldiers and theologians set the tempo for such thought. Persecution dwindled after 1690 to barely nothing in the 1700's. Owen was protected from the severe persecution of nonconformists which did break out, however, after the ejection of 1662 until the time of William and Mary. He even had such a relationship with Charles II that the latter on occasion gave Owen money for

distribution to ejected ministers. So then, religious toleration and indulgence were a matter of liberty of conscience. Owen writes:

Consider [the idea of] forcing the consciences of men . . . and you will find it so uncouth, as I am persuaded, you will not know well what to make of it. Learned divines tell us that "conscience is the judgment that a man maketh of himself and his actions, with reference to the future judgment of God," or to that purpose. Now, let others do what they will, conscience will still make this judgment, nor can it do otherwise. Whatever men can alter in the outward actings of men's lives, they can alter nothing in the inward constitution of the nature given it by God in its creation, which refers to its future end. How can this be forced?³⁶

These may as well be words taken from documents in the American National Archives, but they are not. They belong to a man who preceded the American revolution by a century, who knew and loved Scripture, and whose prime interests were not political but were for the propagation of nothing but the Gospel.

Conclusion

First of all, there must be the desire to run the Church in the most Biblical manner possible. That being true, efforts must be made to seek out from the Scriptures those commands, ordinances, principles and methods which will most exalt Christ as Lord of our lives and Head of our Church. The closer we are to a consistent, balanced church life, and the more we pray and depend solely on Christ, the more evident He will be in our midst.

³⁶ Works, XIII, p. 527.

After becoming familiar with the pure Biblical data on ecclesiology, it is helpful to make a serious study of those Christians who wrote most skillfully on the matter, as God taught them in years gone by. There are many. But it has been the purpose of this paper to show that John Owen was a key figure in the development of much of evangelical ecclesiology that we know today. And although he wrote as an Oxford scholar, and takes an effort to read, he is worthy of our study. In a word, he did evidence a balance and non-partisan approach to ecclesiology. Today we need all the wisdom we can get, if the Church is to emerge temporally victorious in its mission to propogate the gospel. When we say that we are of this denomination or that denomination, are we not saying "I am of Paul, and I am of Christ?" Indeed, if we are truly of Christ, let our profession end with that. His grace is sufficient for us, and so therefore, let us "hold forth the word of life, that we may rejoice in the day of Christ, not having run in vain, neither labored in vain" (Phil. 2:16).

Neil C. Bangaard

APPENDIX

The Primary Ecclesiological Works of John Owen
(Extracted from John Owen: God's Statesman by Peter Toon)

1. The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished (1643)
2. Two Short Catechisms, Wherein the Doctrines of Christ are Explained (1645)
3. Eshcol; or Rules of Direction for the Walking of the Saints (1647)
4. Righteous Zeal: a Sermon with an Essay on Toleration (1649)
5. Christ's Kingdom and the Magistrate's Power: a Sermon (1652)
6. Of Schism (1657)
7. A Review of the True Nature of Schism (1657)
8. An Answer to a later Treatise of Daniel Cawdry about . . . Schism (1658) in A Defense of Mr. John Cotton (1658)
9. Two Questions Concerning the Power of the Supreme Magistrate About Religion (1659)
10. Animadversions on a Treatise Entitled Fiat Lux (1662)
11. A Discourse Concerning Liturgies (1662)
12. A Vindication of the Animadversions of Fiat Lux (1664)
13. Indulgence and Toleration Considered (1667)
14. A Peace-Offering, in an Apology and Humble Plea for Indulgence (1667)
15. A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God (1667)
16. An Account of the Grounds and Reasons on which Protestant Dissenters desire Liberty (1670)

17. A Discourse concerning Evangelical Love, Church-Peace and Unity (1672)
18. The Testimony of the Church is not the chief reason for our believing the Scripture to be the Word of God (printed in N. Vincent, The Morning Exercises against Popery) (1675)
19. Some Considerations of Union Among Protestants (1680)
20. A Brief Vindication of the Nonconformists From the Charge of Schism (1680)
21. An Inquiry Into the Original, Nature . . . and Communion of Evangelical Churches (1681)
22. A Letter concerning the Matter of the Present Excommunications (1683)
23. True Nature of the Gospel Church (1689)
24. A Guide to Church Fellowship and Order (1692)
25. An Answer Unto Two Questions . . . With Twelve Arguments Against any Conformity to Worship not of Divine Institutions (1720)
26. Three Discourses Delivered at the Lord's Table (1750)

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