VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

“Reformed and Reforming: John Owen on the Kingdom of Christ”

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor aan
de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
op gezag van de rector magnificus
prof.dr. F.A. van der Duyn Schouten,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
ten overstaan de promotiecommissie
van de Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid

op maandag 7 september 2015 om 13.45 uur

in de aula van de universiteit,

De Boelelaan 1105

door

Ryan Thomas Kelly

geboren te

Michigan, Verenigde Staten
promotor: prof.dr. A. van de Beek

copromotor: dr. P. de Vries
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements vii

1. Introduction 1
   I. The Thesis Briefly Described
   II. Scholarship Related to Owen
       A. The Muller School
       B. Early Modern Historians
       C. Owen Studies
   III. Statement of the Problem
   IV. The Aims of this Study
   V. The Method and Scope of this Study

2. A Biographical Sketch of John Owen 37
   I. Years of Preparation (1616-43)
   II. Pastoral Ministry (1643-49)
   III. Affairs of the State (1648-58)
       A. Parliamentary Preacher
       B. Leading Oxford University
       C. Attempts at a Cromwellian Church Settlement
   IV. The Experience of Defeat (1658-83)

3. Setting Up the Kingdom:
   The Theology and Politics of Cofessionalization 51
   I. Background: Reformation and Confessionalization
   II. Attempts at a Cromwellian Church Settlement
       A. The Humble Proposals (1652)
       B. The Instrument of Government (1653)
       C. The New Confession (1654)
       D. The Humble Petition and Advice (1657)
III. The Savoy Assembly (1658)
   A. Beginning with Westminster
   B. Clarifying Congregationalism
   C. Separating Declaration of Faith and Church Order
   D. Liberty, the Magistrate, and Confession
   E. A Parliamentary Precedent for Ecclesiastical Liberty
   F. Summarizing the Assembly’s Intentions
   G. Scripture, Confessions, and Confessing Anew

IV. Sources for Owen’s View of the National Kingdom
V. Kingdom and Confessions, post-1662
   A. Consistencies in Nonconformity
   B. Flexibility in Nonconformity

VI. Conclusion

4. The Keys of the Kingdom:
The Nature, Power, and Government of the Church 117

I. Introduction
II. A Window into a Debate: Cawdrey v. Owen
III. Identifying Owen’s Earliest Ecclesiology
IV. The Influence of Cotton’s Keyes
   A. The Key of “the Keys”
   B. Summarizing Cotton’s Keyes
V. The Earliest Signs of Owen’s Congregationalism
   A. “A Country Essay for Church Government” (1646)
   B. Ministry in Coggeshall, Essex (1646-49)
   C. Eschol; A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan (1648)
   D. Congregational, not Independent
VI. Two Pillars of Owen’s Later Ecclesiology
   A. The Nature of the Church:
      Catholic-Visible and/or Visible?
   B. The Authority of the Church:
      Who Holds the “Keys of the Kingdom”?
   C. Summary and Analysis
VII. Connecting Liberty and Ecclesiology
VIII. Conclusion
5. The Coming of the Kingdom: 
Eschatology and its Political-Ecclesiastical Significance

I. Introductory Matters
   A. Varying Assessments of Owen’s Eschatology
   B. Rethinking Apocalyptic Historiography
   C. Clarifying Eschatological Terms and Views

II. The Major Eschatological Themes
   A. The Latter Days
   B. Antichrist Destroyed
   C. The Jews Called
   D. The Adversaries of the Kingdom Broken
      1. Shaking and Translating
      2. In Defense of Regicide
      3. Four Months Before
   E. The Churches Enlarged
   F. Churches Edified by Free and Plentiful Light
   G. Summary

III. The Subtle Eschatological Underpinnings
   A. Interpretive Cautions
      1. Providence
      2. Computations
      3. Eschatological Specifics
   B. Warnings and Human Responsibility
      1. Liberty
      2. Personal Reformation
      3. Reformation and Unity
   C. One Added Nuance

IV. Conclusion

6. Conclusion

I. Political/Ecclesiastical Works and Endeavors

II. Summary of Findings
   A. Setting Up the Kingdom: Confessionalization
   B. The Keys of the Kingdom: Church Government
   C. The Coming of the Kingdom: The Latter-Day

III. Aims and Assessment
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samenvatting</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Vitae</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

Every PhD student accrues considerable debts (or opportunities for gratitude) in the long process of researching and writing a dissertation. Arguably, the longer one takes to finish a dissertation the more people there are to acknowledge and thank.

My doctoral studies began in 1998 at the University of Oxford under the supervision of Rev. Dr. J.E. Platt. I was forced to withdraw the following year due to a shortage of funding and health issues; however, Oxford forever left an imprint on my wife and me. Many years later, Prof. Dr. Bram van de Beek and Dr. Willem van Asselt kindly agreed to supervise my PhD. Both men were extremely patient with my early rough drafts, changing interests, and slow progress. Seasons of near-debilitating migraines — along with an ever-busy pastorate, a growing family, and a few side writing projects — kept me from sticking to any predictable timetable.

It was a great privilege to have Prof. Dr. van Asselt as co-supervisor until his death in 2014. Many thanks are owed to Dr. Pieter de Vries, who replaced Dr. van Asselt as co-promotor, and also provided informal supervision in years preceding. Prof. Dr. van de Beek especially has been a kind and enthusiastic Doktorvater over these many years. All of my supervisors, in various ways, have challenged and refined my thinking and writing, making the dissertation far better than it could have otherwise been.

Desert Springs Church in Albuquerque, NM, USA, has patiently endured many years with its Preaching Pastor slightly distracted by an unfinished dissertation. More than enduring it, they have tirelessly cheered me on and prayed for me and my family. The elders of DSC — my overseers and fellow shepherds — have supported my education with sabbaticals, prayer, funding, accountability, and, occasionally, needed threats to “get it done!” The staff in various ways have filled in holes left by my absences, and have been a constant source of encouragement and friendship. Special thanks are due to four personal assistants who
endured and aided my PhD studies over the years: Gayle Renshaw, Ben DeSpain, Parker Landis, and especially Trent Hunter. Autumn Kelly assisted with the painstaking work of manually compiling the footnotes into a bibliography, and Memo Ochoa very kindly designed the cover for print.

Several friends and colleagues read early versions of chapters and offered helpful feedback: Drs. Tim Cooper, Mark Jones, Justin Taylor, Carl Trueman, and Fred Zaspel. These and many other friends routinely asked for updates and encouraged me on. Thanks to Drs. Chad Van Dixhoorn, Hunter Powell, and Sebastian Rehnman for helpful conversations. Pastoral colleagues, Dr. Ron Giese and Nathan Sherman, gave considerable time and careful scrutiny to editing and refining a close-to-final draft. Lisa Ragsdale kindly gave her editorial eye to several earlier essays for my doctoral studies. Special thanks are owed to Dr. Giese, my Hebrew/O.T. professor in seminary (1996-98) and now Executive Pastor at DSC, who has encouraged and supported my academic endeavors perhaps as much as anyone, save my wife.

Thanks are in order to the staffs of several libraries in which research for this thesis was conducted: Bodleian Library, Oxford; John Rylands Library, Manchester; Dr Williams Library, London; and University of New Mexico libraries. The librarians of Westminster Theological Seminary and Calvin Theological Seminary have at key times very graciously helped with resources from a distance. The Lampstand Foundation provided two grants for research travel expenses. Thanks, as well, to Logos Bible Software who provided me with their e-version of The Works of John Owen.

I wish to thank my external readers for their time and support: Prof. Dr. W. van Vlastuin, Prof. Dr. J. Hoek, Prof. Dr. H. van den Belt, Prof. Dr. Kelly Kapic, and Dr. Sebastian Rehnman.

My greatest earthly debt of gratitude goes to my wife, Sarah: my best friend, partner in life and ministry, and greatest earthly joy. She has been a relentless supporter and encourager of my education since we married in 1996. She has often been my first proofreader, saving me from countless embarrassments. More than that, she has always been keen to understand the ins and outs of people, events, and ideas of which I’ve written. Surely that is a mark of her loving selflessness and able intellect, and not because I’ve written on such fascinating matters. Sarah, your
patience, strength, and godliness are truly remarkable. Thank you for everything. I truly could not (or would not) have reached this goal without you. Along with my wife, my children — Autumn, Katelyn, Gillian, and William — have been a delight and the perfect reward after a long day in my study or when a chapter is finished. Thanks, sweet kids, for your care, prayers, cheers, affection, and laughter.

Last but not least, thanks are owed to my parents and in-laws who have supported my education in countless ways, not least through their prayers and love. Thank you.

In finem, soli Deo gloria!
Chapter

1

Introduction

I. The Thesis Briefly Described

This work of intellectual history focuses on the kingdom of Christ in the thought and activity of John Owen (1616-83). Before describing this project any further, however, it will be useful to begin with a general summary of Owen’s understanding of the kingdom of God.

In a sermon to Parliament in 1652, Owen describes the kingdom of Christ in a three-fold sense. (1) “First and principally,” it is “that which is internal and spiritual, in and over the souls of men.” He explains further, “[Christ] takes possession of their hearts by his power, dwelling in them by his Spirit, making them kings in his kingdom, and bringing them infallibly into glory.” Owen pauses on this point to apply it to England’s rulers:

Oh, that this rule, this kingdom of his, might be carried on in our hearts! We busy ourselves about many things; we shall find at length

---


2 Owen uses interchangeably kingdom of Christ, kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven, and simply, Zion.

3 “Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power” (1652), in Works, 8:371.
this one thing necessary. This is that part of the kingdom of Christ which we are *principally* to aim at in the preaching of the gospel ....

Owen frequently stresses the necessity of preaching for people’s entrance into Christ’s kingdom. Writing two decades later and in a very different political environment, Owen insists, “the gathering of his church, the setting up of his kingdom, the establishment of his throne, the setting of the crown upon his head, depend wholly on ... the preaching of the gospel.”

Returning to Owen’s sermon to Parliament, he continued with a second way in which the kingdom may be considered. (2) It is that “rule or government which in his word he hath appointed and ordained for all his saints ... to testify their inward subjection to him, and be fitted for usefulness one to another” — that is to say, Christ’s kingdom is his church. Again Owen paused to make application for his listeners in the House: they were to be “carrying on the ... spiritual ends of Christ” in the “propagation” of this kingdom; and the “administration” of this is “wrapped up in the laws, ordinances, institutions, and appointments of the gospel.” Here, Owen was not confusing the kingdom of Christ for the kingdoms of men; but neither was he separating the two completely. Like his Reformed predecessor, John Calvin, Owen believed that civil magistrates had a duty to protect, even promote, the gospel; likewise, rulers must, for the sake of the gospel, seek to limit the propagation of heresies. Chapter 24 of the Savoy

---

5 An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews (1680), in *Works*, 20:428 (emphasis added).
7 “Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power,” in *Works*, 8:373.
8 Owen likely would not have agreed with everything that Calvin wrote on the Civil Magistrate in his magisterial *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Bk. 4, Ch. 20) — such as the use of coercion or the exact parameters of freedom — but both theologians understood civil government as a gift of God for the church and spread of the gospel; likewise, both agreed that that which is civil should not be confused for the church or the kingdom of Christ.
Introduction

Declaration of Faith and Order (1658) summarizes Owen’s position well:

the magistrate is bound to encourage, promote, and protect the professors and profession of the gospel, and to manage and order civil administrations in a due subserviency to the interest of Christ in the world, and to that end to take care that men of corrupt minds and conversations do not licentiously publish and divulge blasphemy and errors, in their own nature subverting the faith and inevitably destroying the souls of them that receive them ....

This is why Owen’s applications to Parliament spoke to both preaching and laws. The latter were to serve the former toward the ends of Christ’s kingdom; the laws were to help, not stand in the way of, the kingdom’s further coming. This leads to the third way in which the kingdom is to be understood, according to Owen. It is now, but still to come.

(3) In “the last day,” Owen attests, there will be “universal judgment.” This too is part of the kingdom of Christ. Owen does not understand this to be a single, momentary, and final event, however. As he goes on to clarify, the final judgment (or consummation) will be preceded by “shakings and desolations” which, on the one hand, break and judge that which stands against Christ; and which, on the other hand, serve the further advancement of Christ’s kingdom. In this third aspect of the kingdom of Christ, “the civil powers of the world, after fearful shakings and desolations, shall be disposed of into a useful subserviency to the interest, power, and kingdom of Jesus Christ. Hence they are said to be his kingdoms,” referencing Rev. 11:15, that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of Christ. It is all “to be disposed of for the behoof of his interest, rule, and dominion. ... Even judges and rulers ... must kiss the Son, and own his sceptre, and advance his ways.”

---

9 Indeed, Owen may very well have written this paragraph himself, as a leading Congregationalist representative of the Savoy Assembly.

10 “Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power,” in Works, 8:373.

11 “Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power,” in Works, 8:374.
Reformed and Reforming

To summarize, Owen understands the kingdom as a spiritual and internal reality in the hearts of his saints; yet, it is to spread and grow, and thereby be manifested in various external and visible ways. These external manifestations of the kingdom can then be reduced to three overlapping but distinguishable aspects or realms: civil, ecclesiastical, and eschatological. It is these three aspects of the kingdom that will direct the focus and make up the body of this study, each receiving a lengthy chapter for analysis (chapters 3-5).

This will be a theological and contextual study, situating Owen’s works within the complex and quickly changing circumstances of England’s civil wars, Interregnum, and Restoration eras (roughly 1640-80s), in order to consider the relationship of politics, theology, liberty/toleration, ecclesiastical unity, church polity, and eschatology, both in Owen’s thought and England’s struggle for further reformation. It is a study of what may loosely be called “the reformation of John Owen,” in that it is a study of the national reform in which Owen was involved, but also related to Owen’s experience of personal reformation. That is to say, Owen’s beliefs about each of these three foci went through some measure of change or development, as we shall see. Thus, this study will paint a portrait of Owen as one who was Reformed and reforming.

There are a number of reasons for attempting an investigation of these matters in Owen’s life and thought. These reasons will be articulated later in the chapter. Before that, it will be helpful to review the secondary literature related to Owen, which will also help to establish the reasons for and parameters of this study.

II. Scholarship Related to Owen

It used to be fair to begin a dissertation or monograph on Owen by noting that his life and thought have not received their due attention in the academic studies of history and historical
theology. And, indeed, for one whose contemporaries had termed “the Calvin of England” and “the Atlas and Patriarch of Independency,” Owen’s influence on the seventeenth century and the broader Reformed tradition has, on the whole, been underappreciated in the scholarly community. However, this problem is increasingly being remedied. As such it may be fairer to begin a survey of the secondary literature by noting that the once overlooked and under-analyzed Owen has now, in fact, become an important figure to a large body of literature. And yet, there are a number of ways in which each of the below three categories of scholarship still call for further careful study of his thought and context.

A. The Muller School

First, the work of Richard Muller and others have demonstrated that Owen’s theological kind — the Reformed Orthodox — is worthy of investigation not as an aberration of the faithful Reformed tradition, but as a rather mainstream and important representation of it. What may be termed “the Muller school” has argued for basic continuity of theological content between the Reformation and the Reformed Orthodox, the latter

---


simply contextualizing that theology according to its peculiarly second-generation need for codification and institutionalization.\textsuperscript{16}

More recent articulations of this thesis have suggested that perhaps the term “development,” rather than “continuity” or “discontinuity,” is better to describe the relationship between the Reformation and the Reformed Orthodox.\textsuperscript{17} Similarly, Muller himself has more recently seemed keen to clarify that, while he sees an understood and essential Reformed confessional unity in the International Orthodox community of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there are also important points of diversity within that Reformed trajectory.\textsuperscript{18}

Though the older debate between continuity and discontinuity theorists of the Reformation may have seen its day, further questions still remain about Reformed Orthodoxy’s self-identity:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} See Carl Trueman, “The Reception of Calvin: Historical Considerations,” Church History and Religious Culture 91 (2011) 19-27; “Calvin and Calvinism,” p. 226.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Muller, “John Calvin and Later Calvinism,” pp. 130-49; “Disunity in the Reformed Tradition,” in Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Reformed Puritanism, Michael Haykin and Mark Jones, eds. (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), pp. 11-30. See also: idem, After Calvin, pp. 33-34, 51-52; PRRD, 1:27-34.
\end{itemize}
Introduction

e.g., the extent of its diversity, the parameters of its unity, the influence from other continents, its relationship to overlapping reforming movements (such as Puritanism and the Dutch *Nadere Reformatie*), and the points of contextual distinctiveness for any given person, place, and period. Owen has been an important figure for these discussions, not least because he has often functioned as a litmus test to determine Reformed Orthodoxy’s fidelity to or distortion of the magisterial reformers — some scholars painting Owen as a villain, others as an exemplar of the post-Reformation Reformed.

Regardless of whether one sees Owen as a proper successor to Reformation theology or not, another point needs to be made. In such analyses, only the more strictly doctrinal elements of Owen’s thought have received attention: the Trinity, Christology, atonement, justification, predestination, theological method, prolegomena, philosophical influences, etc. This is understandable for the purposes of each work — and these are certainly important loci for understanding Owen’s thought — however, these emphases also mean that the more practical, political, ecclesiastical, and eschatological corners of Owen’s thought have been neglected over the same years. Owen is today more famous for his large theological treatises and commentaries, but his sermons, tracts, and works on practical matters of ecclesiology and religious politics actually far outnumber the former. This is a point to which we shall return; however, next it will be useful to consider Owen from another scholarly angle.

B. Early Modern Historians

Within the discipline of early modern history over the last few decades there has been a growing appreciation for the explicitly

---

19 The term Puritan/ism will be discussed later in this chapter.

20 While there are many examples of scholars who have used Owen’s writings to critique or defend Reformed Orthodoxy, it can be most clearly seen in the critique of Alan Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology, 1640-1790—An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) and the response in defense of Owen by Carl Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen’s Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998).
religious/theological dimension to the civil debates and developments in Britain’s late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.\textsuperscript{21} In short, there has been a growing consensus that their civil wars were, at root, “wars of religion.”\textsuperscript{22} As such, more recent historical recreations of the Revolution and Restoration periods (1640-89) have moved Owen and other ecclesiastical-statesmen from the radical fringe to somewhere within the moderate center.\textsuperscript{23} Other historians, building upon the work of Patrick Collinson, have added nuance by emphasizing the diversity of opinions even within “the godly.”\textsuperscript{24} This has resulted in discussions about the difficulty of taxonomy or clean party lines.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, the definition of historical terms — e.g., Orthodox,


\textsuperscript{22} Building upon the monumental work of John Morrill, see the recent treatment: Charles Prior and Glenn Burgess, eds., England’s Wars of Religion, Revisited (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011).

\textsuperscript{23} For example: Christopher Durston and Judith Maltby, eds., Religion in Revolutionary England (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2006); Patrick Little and David Smith, Parliaments and Politics During the Cromwellian Protectorate (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007).


Reformed, Puritan, Dissent, Independent, Presbyterian, Conformist, Royalist, Antinomian, Millenarian, etc. – has been increasingly debated. There has also been a growing appreciation for the international reciprocation of influences, which mirrors a similar dynamic in the study of the internationality of Reformed Orthodoxy. Early modern historians have also increasingly stressed the importance of tracing out the informal allegiances and personal grudges between historical figures, of tracking down private correspondence and diaries, even giving

---


28 On the latter, see Tim Cooper, John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity (Aldershot: Asgate, 2011), which attempts to understand the interpersonal tensions between Owen and Baxter.

painstaking attention to county records and “church books.” In short, this newer historiography is keen to take a more street-level approach to piecing together the political-religious movements and events.

Owen’s important role in the politics of the Protectorate (and also the leadership of nonconformity in the Restoration) seems to be recognized increasingly by historians. Blaire Worden has gone so far as to say that Owen was “the architect of the Cromwellian church” of the 1650s. Even if this is slightly overstated, it is further proof of the theological dimensions of today’s historiography and Owen’s important role in it.

Yet, one wonders if early modern historians are yet sufficiently theological in their assessment of one like Owen. On the one hand, this is somewhat understandable: historical analyses which span several decades and weave between hundreds of figures do not, by nature, have the capability of precisely communicating the depths, contours, and interconnections in the thought of a prodigious thinker like Owen. On the other hand, and less understandable, are the examples of historians not benefiting from, or even acknowledging, the equally rigorous work of historical theologians. One example is *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* — an otherwise excellent collection of essays from today’s best early modern historians, but which makes no mention of Richard Muller or related historical theologians who have been simultaneously examining many of the same historical figures and ideas.

The finger might also be pointed in the opposite direction (as some have). Perhaps historical theologians have not yet


Introduction

sufficiently caught up to the more nuanced, more “street-level”
historiography that is being undertaken by able historians. As Tim Cooper pointed out, while it is possible to “too starkly distinguish between Theology and History,” over the last several decades no historical treatments have been written on Owen whereas several have for his contemporaries like Richard Baxter. As we shall see in what follows, many works indeed have been written on Owen’s theology; but, again, the emphasis has been on the more strictly doctrinal aspects of his thought to the neglect of his more practical thoughts, especially those ecclesiastical and political. Because of Owen’s central role in ecclesiastical politics (proactively in the Protectorate and more defensively in years of nonconformity) this is an unfortunate gap in the scholarship.

This, however, was not always the case. Earlier analyses of Owen were essentially historical overviews, giving greater focus to his political-ecclesiastical endeavors than the deep contours of his doctrinal thought. It is from that point, in the early 1970s, that we begin a longer survey of what may be termed “Owen studies” proper.


35 Two notable exceptions to this rule are: (1) the essays in Mark Jones and Kelly Kapic, eds., The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012). This volume grew out of the John Owen Today conference in Cambridge, UK (2008). Both historians and theologians contributed, and the final product was a multi-discipline enterprise with a few chapters dealing with ecclesiastical politics or ecclesiology. (2) Cooper, John Owen, Richard Baxter is study of the points of contention between Owen and Baxter in order to illuminate complexities within the Puritan Revolution. Thus, ecclesiastical politics are addressed throughout, but not as a focus.

36 Those uninterested in a survey of Owen studies may safely skip to the next section of this chapter, as the next several pages will only patiently bolster the case that is being made for this dissertation’s foci and aims. On the other hand, what follows will be a necessarily selective survey. The most thorough literature review of work on Owen (up to 2001) is Kelly Kapic, “Communion with God: Relations between the Divine and Human in the Theology of John Owen” (PhD diss., King’s College London, 2001), pp. 12-48. For a nearly exhaustive compilation of primary
C. Owen Studies

In the early 1970s, the monumental biographical work by Peter Toon was quickly followed by the more politically-focused doctoral research of Sarah Cook. Both were a thorough investigation of primary sources. It is unfortunate that Cook’s work has not reached publication, since in many ways it is more thorough than Toon’s, especially on Owen’s political career in the late-1640s and 1650s. Owen’s political views were also examined a decade later by Lloyd Glyn Williams who suggested (as Toon and Cook had previously) that his politics were intrinsically connected to his eschatology. Unlike his predecessors, however, Williams argued that Owen’s optimistic eschatology during the Revolution was not substantially shaken by the Puritan defeat of the Restoration. Most studies since Williams have reverted to more common the interpretation that the post-1660 Owen was willing to “rethink elements of his eschatology.”

What the works of Toon, Cook, and Williams have in common is the important political aspect of Owen’s career. But between these historians there is not agreement on identifying

---


38 See also Sarah Cook, “Congregational Independents and the Cromwellian Constitution,” Church History (1977) 335-57.


40 For example, Kelly Kapic, Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 27.
Introduction

Owen’s ideals for God and nation. For Cook, Owen was a slightly radical Republican; Toon was skeptical of the Republican interpretation that was rather forcefully laid down by A. G. Matthews; and Williams argued extensively that Owen never abandoned belief in a magistrate (“with advice of his parliament”) even after the Restoration.

Regardless of their differing assessments of Owen’s politics, these works were written three to four decades ago. Scholarship has evolved greatly in that time: databases like Early English Books Online and British History Online have not only changed the speed at which documents can be viewed—and that they can be searched electronically—but also that some long-forgotten documents could be rediscovered.

If Toon, Cook, and Williams wrote, more or less, theologically-aware but politically-oriented biographies, most other analyses of Owen since the 1970s have more purely focused on the whole or parts of his doctrinal thought. Sinclair Ferguson provided a broad analysis of Owen’s theology through the lens of the “Christian life.” Dewey Wallace, who went on to have a substantial career as a historian of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, first wrote a Princeton dissertation on Owen. It was a more contextually-nuanced study than most, but, unfortunately, attention was limited to 1660 and earlier, thereby leaving out important issues about Owen’s later thought. Dale Stover focused on Owen’s pneumatology, arguing that it shapes the whole of his

43 Early English Books Online: www.eebo.chadwyck.com; British History Online: www.british-history.ac.uk.
thought.⁴⁶ Both Toon and Ferguson touched upon possible connections between pneumatology and other doctrines in Owen’s writings, as did Geoffrey Nuttall and Horton Davies in their works on Puritan ecclesiology.⁴⁷ A full-monograph study of the pneumatological orientation to Owen’s theology would have been important, but, unfortunately, Stover’s turned out to be a rather hopeless project. He remarkably argued that Owen’s consistently pneumatological orientation led to a rationalistic, anthropomorphic, and overly-subjective epistemology, which so emphasized the “personal” that the humanity of Christ was “basically omitted” from his Christology; and “the church [had] little significance” for Owen.⁴⁸

A number of doctoral dissertations on Owen came out of Westminster Theological Seminary, often under the supervision of Sinclair Ferguson and usually devoted to one aspect or another of the “Calvin vs. the Calvinists” debate (of course, all arguing strongly against the “Calvin against the Calvinists” thesis). Richard Hawkes argued for the coherence of Owen’s soteriology. But with very little interaction with secondary literature or other (non-Owen) primary literature, the final product was more a work of devotional systematic theology than historical theology. The best of the Westminster Seminary dissertations on Owen was Joel Beeke’s, which compared the varying views on assurance of Calvin, the English Puritans (especially Owen), and the Dutch Nadere Reformatie.⁴⁹ Richard Daniels’s work addressed the

---

important and previously neglected topic of Owen’s Christology.\(^50\) But like many of its predecessors, Daniel’s work was a “practical study,” neither sufficiently contextualized nor adequately analytical.\(^51\)

At the same time, Robert Wright was working on Owen’s Christology, focusing on Owen’s massive *Exposition of Hebrews*\(^52\) for his analysis. According to Wright, Owen’s *Hebrews* had polemical aims against Arminianism and Socinianism.\(^53\) Wright concluded that the doctrine of Christ’s priesthood is the core and essence of Owen’s theology.\(^54\) Alan Spence also wrote on Owen’s Christology, providing much more theological nuance than previous studies, especially regarding Christ’s humanity and the intra-Trinitarian relationship.\(^55\) Spence also uniquely utilized the patristic authors and early councils as important conversation partners for the study.

Alan Clifford’s *Atonement and Justification* sought to examine the relationship between theological conclusions and theological methodology by comparing the examples of Owen, Richard Baxter, John Tillotson, John Wesley, and John Calvin, along with the author’s own understanding of these matters in Scripture. This was a truly ambitious enterprise, and, in my opinion, an unsuccessful one. Representative of the aforementioned older scholarship on Reformed Orthodoxy, Clifford’s thesis begins with

---

50 Richard Daniels, “‘Great is the Mystery of Godliness:’ The Christology of John Owen” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1990).


52 Owen’s *Exposition of Hebrews* was originally published in four folio volumes (1668, 1674, 1680, and 1684), and later published *Works*, vols. 18-24.


54 Wright, “John Owen’s Great High Priest,” p. 218. Cf. Muller: “Neither the theology of the Reformers nor the theology of their successors was ‘christocentric’ in the modern sense of identifying Christ as the fundamental cognitive principle for all doctrine” (*PRRD*, 1:39).

55 Alan Spence, “Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology” (PhD diss., King’s College London, 1989); later revised and published as *Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology* (Grand Rapids: T&T Clark, 2008).
the assumption that the first generation of Reformers rejected medieval scholasticism in toto while many of the Orthodox theologians like Owen were influenced by Aristotle’s metaphysics more than Scripture.\(^{56}\) Thus, according to Clifford, Owen’s arguments for limited atonement were driven by Aristotelian “single end” teleology.\(^{57}\) We shall return to Clifford’s work in just a page or so.

Though not interacting with Clifford’s preceding work, Randall Gleason argued for the other side of the “Calvin and the Calvinists” debate by demonstrating elements of “continuity” between the spiritualities of Owen and Calvin.\(^{58}\) It is questionable whether his analysis contributed much to countering the “Calvin vs. the Calvinists” thesis, but as a historical analysis of the Reformed spirituality of two of its best theorists, it is a helpful work. Also Gleason’s work uniquely addressed the “Calvin and the Calvinists” thesis by testing it, not with one of the typical doctrinal loci of the debate, but with practical spirituality.

Somewhat related, Steve Griffiths wrote a more general study of Owen’s doctrine of sin, examining its place in humanity, the Christian life, society, and the church.\(^{59}\) However, these headings are slightly misleading, especially in the case of the chapter, “Sin and the Church,” where very little attention was given to Owen’s ecclesiology. Instead Griffiths focused on Owen’s polemics against Arminains, Socinians, Quakerism, and Roman Catholicism. More important was his chapter “Sin and Society,” which showed (as Toon, Cook, and Williams had previously) that Owen’s eschatology provided a strong basis for his political beliefs. But Griffiths used this eschatological-political connection as a springboard to conclude (without sufficient warrant) that Owen’s politics were Republican. This is an interpretation of Owen which has been variously proposed and contested since the seventeenth

---

\(^{56}\) Clifford, *Atonement and Justification*, p. 95.

\(^{57}\) Clifford, *Atonement and Justification*, pp. 96-97.


Introduction

century itself. But Griffiths uniquely sought to demonstrate that Owen’s Republican tendencies were latent throughout the late 1640-50s; thus, it was not a dramatic and sudden “conversion” to it in 1658 as Matthews suggested. This raised again the old question about the exact political views of Owen. Indeed, Owen’s political views have frequently and variously been labeled in the secondary literature, but in most cases those labels have been insufficiently defended. Griffiths correctly looked back to the 1650s for answers — a time when Owen had significant political sway and was involved in multiple attempts at a constitutional church settlement — but, unfortunately, he only examined a handful of Owen’s Parliamentary sermons and none of the actual relevant legislative work of the decade. In short, this work made no advancement on the previous works that touch upon Owen’s ecclesiastical-politics.

Carl Trueman’s 1998 work, The Claims of Truth, directly challenged the aforementioned work by Clifford. Trueman quite forcefully demonstrated Clifford’s missteps with Owen and Baxter, and thereby addressed afresh many of the inadequacies of the older scholarship on Reformed Orthodoxy. For example, where Clifford criticized Owen’s methodology for being overly systematic or metaphysical, Trueman countered by examining a work of Owen’s heretofore ignored in previous Owen studies. In this Latin work, Theologoumena Pantodapa (1661), Owen organizes theology according to the epochs of redemptive history,

60 Matthews, ed., The Savoy Declaration, pp. 42ff.

61 Such as The Humble Proposals (1652), The Instrument of Government (1653), The Humble Petition and Advice (1657), and the confessional constructions that were tied to constitutional proposals.

62 Curiously, Griffiths makes no use of the two most relevant and important dissertations for his chapter on Owen’s politics: Cook, “A Political Biography of ... John Owen,” and Williams, “God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen.”

63 To be clear, Trueman’s portrait of Owen’s theology is not simply a response to Clifford’s since it provides lengthy discussions in areas of Owen’s doctrine such as Christology and theology proper — matters which were not really examined by Clifford. However, as his Preface states and the rest of the work demonstrates, Trueman intends Claims of Truth as a crossing of swords with Clifford’s assessment of Owen (see Claims of Truth, pp. xix-xii).

64 Works, 17:1-480.
rather than by the more typical systematic arrangement of topics or *loci.* This rather “organic” Federal Theology is highly problematic for Clifford’s thesis.

With very little direct interaction with Clifford’s work, but equally as damaging to his thesis as Trueman’s, was Sebastian Rehnman’s work on Owen’s prolegomenous thought. A meticulous study of the broader intellectual context and the theological methodology of Owen in particular, Rehnman, like Trueman, made substantial use of Owen’s *Theologoumena Pantodapa.* However, Rehnman gave more focus to the work’s “exceedingly negative statements” about the use and abuse of reason, the overuse of technical philosophical terms in theology, etc. According to Rehnman, in *Theologoumena,* Owen “opposes systems of doctrine, systematization, and ratiocination.” In short, Rehnman found Owen’s 1661 treatment of these issues difficult to “harmonise with both his earlier and later writings.” He suggested a “contextual line of explanation” for this inconsistency, in line with what Christopher Hill has referred to as the Puritan “experience of defeat” in the years surrounding the Restoration.

Pieter de Vries’ work examined Owen’s views on communion, election, covenant, Christology, justification, atonement, the Holy Spirit, and the church. One of the benefits of such a broad study

---

66 In Trueman’s own words: “[Owen’s] most comprehensive treatment of theology … does not choose some sort of causality as its organizational principle, … but rather a pattern which reflects as closely as possible the narrative flow of the Bible” (*Claims of Truth,* p. 63).
67 Rehnman, *Divine Discourse,* which was a revision of the author’s “Theologia Traditia: A Study in the Prolegomenous Discourse of John Owen (1616-1683)” (DPhil diss., Univ. of Oxford, 1997). Rehnman has also made unique biographical contribution by providing a much more thorough sketch of Owen’s curricula at Oxford University and his broader intellectual influences. See *Divine Discourse,* pp. 18-44; “John Owen: A Reformed Scholastic at Oxford,” in *Reformation and Scholasticism,* pp. 181-203.
69 *Divine Discourse,* p. 120.
70 *Divine Discourse,* pp. 124-27.
71 Pieter de Vries, “Die mij heeft liefgehad: ” De betekenis van de gemeenschap met Christus in *de theologie van John Owen (1616-1683)* (Heereneven: Uitgeverij Groen, 1999). See also idem, “The Significance of Union and Communion with Christ in
(if done well, which I believe de Vries has) is a better opportunity to observe the interrelationship of doctrines — i.e., the connections and influences between doctrines in view of a theological whole. This is a matter that has already surfaced more than once in this survey of work on Owen: for instance, how his pneumatology and eschatology may have strong ties to other doctrines. De Vries delved into these and other possible theological connections throughout his study, particularly arguing for an eschatological basis for Owen’s views of liberty and Congregationalist ecclesiology.\textsuperscript{72} His analysis was also, on the whole, more sensitive to the possibility of shifts, developments, or changes in Owen’s thought and method than others.

Henry Knapp’s dissertation ably demonstrated the exegetical sophistication of the Reformed Scholastics, using Owen’s \textit{Exposition of Hebrews} as a test case.\textsuperscript{73} Unfortunately, Knapp’s work was strictly focused to matters of hermeneutics, and thus, there was little discussion of Owen’s \textit{theologizing} — i.e., the process of moving from exegesis to doctrine. Of course, that theme could be its own dissertation, so Knapp’s limitations are understandable.

Michael Bobick wrote on Owen’s covenant theology.\textsuperscript{74} Bobick’s work was unique for its thesis that Owen’s covenant theology was shaped less by Aristotelian than Ramist logic. Owen’s preference for Ramist bifurcations, Bobick argued, led him to an overly rigid balance between law and grace, between demand and promise, between covenant of works and covenant of grace. Bobick distinguished too strongly between these two philosophies.\textsuperscript{75} Regardless, even if Owen can be shown to more

\footnotesize{the Theology of John Owen (1616-1683),” Reformed Theological Journal 17 (2001) 77-96.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{72} See de Vries, “Die mij heeft liefgehad,” chap. 9.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{73} Henry Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God: John Owen and Seventeenth-Century Exegetical Methodology” (PhD diss., Calvin theological Seminary, 2002).}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{74} Michael Bobick, “Owen’s Razor: The Role of Ramist Logic in the Covenant Theology of John Owen” (1616-1683)” (PhD diss., Drew Univ., 1996).}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{75} For this understanding of Ramism, see Willem J. van Asselt and Pieter Rouwendal, “Distinguishing and Teaching: Constructing a Theological Argument in Reformed Scholasticism,” in Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism, pp. 92-100.}
strongly favor Ramism over Aristotelianism, Bobick overstated its role in the shape of Owen’s covenant theology.

Using Owen’s covenant theology as a test case to further refute the “Calvin vs. the Calvinists” thesis, David Wong argued that Owen’s covenant theology is not a speculative, scholastic construction designed to soften the harshness of Calvin’s predestinarian system, as Perry Miller argued.66 Rather Owen’s is a natural development of Calvin’s theology.67 However, the picture that emerges from Wong’s study is not clear, and possibly even fraught with inconsistencies. Later articles by Rehnman and Mark Jones have been much more helpful in describing Owen’s covenant structure, particularly the complexities and peculiarities therein.68

Aspects of Owen’s covenant theology were also addressed in Trueman’s 2007 Ashgate monograph on Owen.79 On the whole, his second work on Owen — though briefer than his first — was an impressive contextual/theological study. In addition to Owen’s covenant thought there are chapters on Christology, the Trinity, and justification.80 Unfortunately (for our purposes), Trueman only occasionally and briefly touches upon matters of Owen’s ecclesiology/politics.

In fact, Trueman defends his under-emphasis of the practical, experiential, and “Puritan” elements of Owen’s thought. This is a


79 Trueman, John Owen.

80 Trueman, John Owen, pp. 67-99.
small but not unimportant point. The earlier work of de Vries raised this question for Trueman’s 1998 book on Owen, and in his 2007 work, Trueman addressed the matter directly. While he acknowledged the legitimacy of de Vries’ concern, he defended limiting his scope of analysis to atonement and theology proper. Further, he argued that the term “Puritan” is an unhelpful categorization for Owen. Trueman found the term too “elusive” to define, too “minimalist” in its theological content, and too “parochial,” limiting Owen to an English/British intellectual context. This raises important questions about how to understand Owen’s context and influences: how unique were the circumstances of Owen’s England, and how did they shape his thought and writings? These are no small matters, and we shall return to them again later in this chapter.

Published in the same year (2007) were two other works on Owen, both focusing on the aspects of spirituality and communion in Owen’s thought. Brian Kay’s work was more of a prescriptive proposal for private communion, which used Owen as a key source and conversation partner. Kelly Kapic’s work was more strictly a work of historical theology, particularly on Owen’s theology of humanity: our humanity, Christ’s humanity, and the intersection of the two via incarnation, justification, and communion. Both Kay and Kapic addressed experiential/practical matters which, on the whole, had been neglected in Owen studies. Kapic’s work especially provided a theologically-vigorous investigation of Owen’s experiential thought. However, Kapic limited his analysis to personal


82 Trueman, John Owen, pp. 5-6. Trueman made similar points regarding the term Puritan in Claims of Truth, pp. 9-13. In another essay, Trueman freely used the term Puritan but made a similar argument for the internationality of theology in the seventeenth century. See “Puritan Theology as Historical Event: A Linguistic Approach to the Ecumenical Context,” in Reformation and Scholasticism, van Asselt and Dekker, eds., pp. 253-75.

83 Brian Kay, Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2007); Kapic, Communion with God.

experience and communion, neglecting corporate aspects of spirituality and communion, which are both ecclesiastically and nationally oriented in Owen’s thought.

Sungho Lee’s dissertation under Richard Muller explored the themes of ecclesiastical unity and schism in Owen.\textsuperscript{85} Particular attention was given to Owen’s many printed debates with opponents on whether Protestantism, Congregationalism, and (post-Restoration) nonconformity could be termed schismatic. Not surprisingly, the matter of “liberty of conscience” played no small part in these debates. But unfortunately Lee’s analysis of the matter of liberty was primarily reserved to the Restoration period, missing important contextual issues for Owen’s views of liberty prior to 1660.\textsuperscript{86} This is somewhat understandable given that Lee focused on schism—a question central to nonconformity, but less relevant before the Act of Uniformity in 1662. Still, it painted Owen’s views of the kingdom, church, liberty, and dissent with a particular Restoration-hue, and hence Lee provides a somewhat truncated portrait of Owen. For instance, he makes no mention of Owen’s own testimony that his view of liberty changed in the 1640s.\textsuperscript{87} This is a matter which deserves further exploration on its own terms since it has been basically unmentioned, let alone examined, in the secondary literature. Similarly, Owen’s rather famous shift from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism has often been noted, but never thoroughly studied—by Lee or anyone else.

Several dissertations on Owen have also more recently appeared on the scene. Thomas Tucker’s work (2006) addressed Owen on the “analogy of faith,” providing more focused attention to the \textit{analogia fidei} than Knapp was able to do in his broader study of Owen’s scriptural interpretation.\textsuperscript{88} Edwin Tay wrote (in

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{85} Sungho Lee, “All Subjects of the Kingdom of Christ: John Owen’s Conception of Christian Unity and Schism” (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2007).
  \item \textsuperscript{86} The matter of liberty surfaces at various points throughout Lee’s dissertation, but primary attention to the matter is in chapter 5 (pp. 209-56).
  \item \textsuperscript{87} See Owen’s \textit{An Answer to the Late Treatise about the Nature of Schism} (1658), in \textit{Works}, 13:293-94.
  \item \textsuperscript{88} Thomas J. Tucker, “Safeguarding the Treasure: John Owen and the Analogy of Faith” (PhD diss., Univ. of Aberdeen, 2006).
\end{itemize}
Introduction

2010) on Owen’s understanding of Christ’s priesthood in the atonement.\textsuperscript{89} This theme has been taken up by Owen scholars of the past; Tay built upon these and advanced the analysis of Owen’s atonement theology. Christopher Cleveland (2013) wrote on “Thomism in John Owen” under the supervision of John Webster.\textsuperscript{90} Cleveland’s thesis strengthened the arguments of Trueman and others that Owen should be viewed as a Reformed “catholic,” whose Reformation heritage runs through anti-Pelagian Augustinianism and the methodology of medieval thinkers, Thomas especially.\textsuperscript{91} The work of Andrew Leslie in the same year dealt with Owen’s views of authority, scripture, and “the life of faith.”\textsuperscript{92} Leslie argued that Owen “creatively drew upon an ‘ecumenical’ dogmatic and physical heritage to restate and refine the traditional Reformed position on scriptural authority.” This, of course, takes Owen in somewhat the opposite direction as Cleveland’s “Thomism in Owen” thesis, but the two are not necessarily incompatible.

Over the last decade there has clearly been an emphasis on Owen’s epistemology, influences, and scriptural interpretation. While these works have all been worthy contributions to the study of Owen and seventeenth century intellectual thought, the same general paths continue to be retraced.\textsuperscript{93} Or, put another way, some other important areas of Owen’s life and thought continue go untouched and have for far too long.

\textsuperscript{89} Edwin Tay, “Preisthood of Christ in the Atonement Theology of John Owen (1616-1683)” (PhD diss., Univ. of Edinburgh, 2010).

\textsuperscript{90} Now published: Christopher Cleveland, Thomism in John Owen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013).

\textsuperscript{91} See Trueman, John Owen, pp. 22-24, 57-60.


\textsuperscript{93} One wonders just how much Muller’s magisterial PRRD volumes have shaped the study of post-Reformation theology, not just for how to study the period, but what to study. Muller’s 4 volumes are titled: Prolegomena to Theology, Holy Scripture, The Divine Essence and Attributes, and The Triunity of God. Those four headings could also be used to describe the themes which have received the most attention in the study of Owen.
A recent exception to that trend is a published dissertation by Ryan M. McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory: Trinitarian Piety, Public Worship and a Reassessment of John Owen’s Theology.* McGraw argued that while other studies have examined parts of Owen’s Trinitarianism, and others have considered elements of his theology of worship, these two have not yet been properly put together for a distinctly and consciously Trinitarian approach to corporate worship. Further, this thesis examined a practical/experiential element of Owen’s thought on communion – not in the more personal/individual terms that previous works have done, but at the pinnacle point of corporate worship.

However, while McGraw provided an admirable analysis of the theology of corporate worship in Owen’s writings, what is missing are some of the historical nuances related to such heavily contextual matters – such as national church/reform, pursuit of unity outside of local congregations, and liberty/toleration in general. There is also the question of whether other doctrines, such as eschatology, were just as influential on Owen’s view of worship and the church as Trinitarian communion. Of course, it is not fair to criticize a man for the work he did not write. Every work of history is necessarily limited. The point is simply that much more can be said within this general area of Owen’s practical/ecclesiastical theology – an area which has been neglected for too long.

Having provided an overview of the major works on Owen’s life and thought, the question is: what themes emerge from this (admittedly subjective and limited) analysis? A number of observations can be made, which will help form the need for this project as well as its aims.

### III. Statement of the Problem

A historical-theological analysis of Owen’s thought on the kingdom of Christ is warranted for the following overlapping-but-distinguishable reasons.

---

First, no dissertation, monograph, or article has yet explored Owen’s understanding of the kingdom of Christ. For Owen, that theme is less an exegetical study of NT passages, and more a theological application of kingdom into national, ecclesiastical, and eschatological realms. It is highly contextualized — that is, heavily related to the ups and downs in the middle years of “England’s long Reformation.”

Second (and related to the above), early works by Toon, Cook, and Williams provided historical overviews of Owen’s life, which, of course, included attention to the politico-ecclesiastical events and writings occupying Owen’s career. Since the 1970s, however, the vast majority of scholarship on Owen has focused on the more strictly doctrinal parts of his writings. But the intersection of politics, ecclesiology, and eschatology in Owen has largely gone untouched for almost four decades. Further proof of an imbalance, the sheer number of titles in Owen’s extant writings which concern the nation and the church (with eschatology almost constantly in the background) is well over 100.

Third, Owen has been a central figure in the “Calvin and the Calvinists” debate, and the majority of analyses have stressed Owen’s continuity with Reformation theology and Medieval methodology. In other words, Owen has been defended as a typical Reformed Orthodox thinker, neatly fitting within the trajectory of development for the Reformed-catholic tradition. Pertaining to the theological loci examined in such works, this portrait of Owen has been convincing. However, the question must be asked: could different conclusions be drawn about continuity/diversity if the ideas in question were not atonement, Trinity, Christology, Scripture, etc., but politics, liberty, ecclesiology, and eschatology? The question of continuity between generations of reformation has thus far been assessed according to certain doctrines and not to ecclesiastical and political practice.


96 For example: Trueman, Claims of Truth; idem, John Owen; Rehnman, Divine Discourse; Cleveland, Thomism in John Owen.

97 I do not mean to imply that politics or ecclesiology were not doctrinal or theological for Owen or his contemporaries. Indeed they were. The distinction
former rightly concludes basic continuity and natural development, but the latter may suggest more diversity if not outright departures.

Fourth is the problem of the geographic scope of context for analyzing someone like Owen. Historians have generally been more interested in the local/national contexts, and thus are comfortable with terms such as Puritan. Theologians, on the other hand, have generally stressed the internationality of ideas in the seventeenth century, and thus prefer to speak in terms of Reformed Orthodoxy. A recent dissertation by Randall J. Pederson, and co-supervised by Richard Muller, argued convincingly for retaining the term Puritan, defined as: “a distinguishable variety of Reformed spirituality within a specific time frame (c.1550-c.1758) which (1) emphasized a further or more thorough Reformation; and (2) practiced a distinctive style of piety and divinity characterized by an experiential emphasis on Reformed orthodox notions of covenant, predestination, assurance, justification and sanctification.”

I find Pederson’s thesis convincing. My study will assume this definition and retain the terms Puritan/ism as useful for a figure like Owen. The examination of Owen’s efforts in the Puritan Revolution might also (indirectly) contribute to this discussion of defining Puritanism.

Fifth, as for the national orientation of the kingdom in Owen’s thought and context, a number of related matters intersect with each other: e.g., the national church, the magistrate, liberty, uniting “the godly,” limiting heresy, “holy” wars, etc. Owen has been included in the social histories which study such ideas, but arguably without sufficient theological vigor to fully communicate the theological complexities and interconnections between doctrinal and practical here is simply one between two different kinds of doctrines: those of beliefs and others of (belief-rooted) practice. See the discussion on theoria and praxis in Muller, PRRD, 1:340-59.

Introduction

of his thought.99 Also, some historians have suggested a change in Owen’s view of liberty in the later years of the Protectorate.100 This may be the case; however, a much earlier change on liberty seems to have gone overlooked, even though Owen states it explicitly.

Sixth, the question of a change, shift, or development in various points of Owen’s theology has surfaced multiple times in the secondary literature. Owen himself acknowledges adjustments to his views on ecclesiastical polity, liberty, and the necessity of the atonement. Only in the case of the third has sufficient scholarly attention been given, thanks to Trueman.101 Owen’s move from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism has been frequently mentioned in secondary literature, but the matter has never been seriously studied. Occasional attention has been given to one aspect or another of Owen’s ecclesiology, usually in smaller journal articles, but often without sufficient attention to the contextual debates and discussions going on behind the scenes of any singular historical document or idea. This lack of contextual sensitivity was bemoaned by Coffee, and is worth repeating at some length here:

The publication of Owen’s collected works in Goold’s multi-volume edition gives the impression that his was a consistent and coherent body of work. There certainly is much consistency and coherence in Owen, but his sermons and tracts (and even his treatises) were also interventions in particular controversies and they bear the mark of a


specific moment. ... Owen scholarship has typically collated his writings from across the years in order to establish his position .... But it is also worth attending closely to chronology and context, and asking what Owen was trying to achieve by publications in 1646, 1649, 1652 or 1659. ... Owen scholarship needs to be alert to the tensions in his thought and the tactical nature of his moves.  

The importance of context can also be considered more simply and broadly: Owen’s ecclesiological writings come from three distinguishable eras/contexts – as a Presbyterian in the early 1640s, as a powerful Congregationalist in the English Revolution, and as a nonconformist in the years of the Restoration. A differentiation of his writings between these eras/contexts (at the very least) is essential for understanding Owen’s overall views, and yet this is rarely done in the secondary literature.  

Seventh, where Owen’s ecclesiology has been discussed, scholars have not always agreed on the identity or parameters of Owen’s earlier and later ecclesiologies, nor on the nature of the shift between them. For instance, Ferguson suggested that it was merely a shift of awareness for Owen; merely realizing that he had been a Congregationalist all along. Confusion about and/or indifference to Owen’s exact ecclesiology at any given time continue to surface in scholarly studies.  

Eighth, many scholars have occasionally entertained the possibility of broader theological connections for Owen’s ecclesiology, such as a connection to his belief in a “latter-day glory.” Others have explored the eschatological foundations for Owen’s politics and/or view of liberty. However, these suggestions have in most cases been made briefly or even conjecturally. It seems that there is a sense that there is an interconnection between

---

103 One dissertation on Owen even overtly acknowledged a timeless approach to Owen’s works: “We will not consider, for example, any changes in method which might have occurred over the span of Owen’s career” (Bobick, “Owen’s Razor,” p. 165).  
104 Ferguson, John Owen on the Christian Life, p. 162.  
105 On the latter, for example, see: McGraw, A Heavenly Directory, p. 198-99.
Introduction

Owen’s national endeavors, ecclesiastical thought, and eschatology, but the lines of intersection and influence have not been mapped out. To put it in more general terms, previous studies (outside of Owen) have treated national/political, ecclesiological, and eschatological together. This is not only justifiable but necessary for the seventeenth century project of further reformation, but it has not yet been sufficiently examined in Owen specifically.

Ninth, while Owen does not overtly acknowledge any alteration to his views of eschatology, some scholars have suggested that this is, in fact, what occurred after the Restoration. Other scholars have instead believed that his eschatological hope remained intact through it all. But neither side has made an authoritative case. Further needed is an examination of where, how, and to what extent, Owen’s eschatology influenced his political endeavors and the interpretation of circumstances.

Therefore, in the following I propose to examine Owen’s thought, particularly the development of his thought on the kingdom of Christ as he envisioned it to be manifested nation ally, ecclesiologically, and eschatologically. These aspects of Owen’s theology are still understudied, even though they represent major parts of his thought and writings. That they might also represent something of a shift or development in Owen’s thinking adds several beneficial and intriguing dimensions to the study.

The following points, while somewhat overlapping with the above, will further articulate the aims of this study.

IV. The Aims of this Study

First, a word about what this study will not be or aim to do. This will not be a purely scriptural study of the kingdom of God, or even a scriptural study of the same through the lens of Owen. “Kingdom” (or “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of Christ”) is simply the scriptural language that Owen frequently uses when writing of the reign of Christ manifested nationally, ecclesiologically, and eschatologically. Those looking for Owen to unfold a theology of kingdom like modern theologies will be disappointed with the following analysis.\footnote{107}

Secondly, on the broadest level, this study will seek to provide an interpretive historical sketch of religion in England/Britain in the 1640-80s. Of course, social historians have done this very thing countless times, but here it will be done through the writings and experience of one of the period’s most influential figures.

Thirdly, this is a study on the relationship of politics, liberty, unity, confessionalization, ecclesiology, and eschatology – both in Owen’s thought and England’s struggle for further reformation. There is an interrelationship between these matters, especially in Owen’s thought, but the lines of connection, interdependence, and influence need to be better explained. This study will seek to determine where and how such matters intersect.

Fourthly, this study aims to be an overtly theological-contextual study, attempting to bridge a gap between the disciplines of history and theology. Or, put more modestly, I will attempt to ask the questions and use the tools of both social historians and historical theologians. An examination of these areas particularly – liberty, ecclesiology, and eschatology – requires vigilant attention to the contextual matters: circumstances, debates,
parties, influences (at home and abroad), exchange of print, and the ever-changing religious-political trends in mid-seventeenth century. This also requires attention not only to the predictable (though neglected) primary sources in Owen’s works and the relevant works of his contemporaries, but also to pamphlets, tracts, legislative proposals, private journals, Parliamentary records, speeches, and unpublished correspondence. At a number of points, Owen’s convictions and intentions will be illuminated by these less obvious sources.

Fifthly and closely related, it is hoped that this study might serve as a small corrective to a tendency in intellectual history and historical theology to treat a figure’s thought through a timeless, fixed, and unchanging lens. Still too frequently overlooked (or at least unmentioned) is the precise year of a document’s authorship, the circumstances surrounding it, the aims of writing it, and the intended audience. This shortcoming is perhaps more pronounced in the study of Puritan individuals, as Coffey suggested regarded Owen’s compiled *Works*. More contextualized, historically-sensitive studies of one like Owen might not only lead to better clarity on historical events and ideas, but also expose shifts, changes, and developments within a historical figure. In other words, there needs to be openness to the development of ideas not just between individuals, but also within the individuals themselves.

Sixthly, this will be a study of personal theological reassessment and refinement — of personal reformation, so to speak. Owen seems rather unique among his contemporaries for the sheer number of instances where an aspect of his thought endured personal reform — whether a shift, development or outright reversal. In a few of these cases, he even provides rare autobiographical testimony to the process, influences, and timing of having come to a fresh realization on a given matter.\(^{108}\) Such accounts are some of the most autobiographical material to have survived from one who is rather infamous for having left so little

personal information and private thoughts. These accounts do not exactly allow us to peer deeply into his soul, but they demonstrate the curious reality that some of his most self-reflective moments (at least in extant print) are those in which he retraces his steps of theological evaluation and reformation. Therein they also provide unique access into parts of his theological mind and his understanding of the theological task. This study will seek to make better use of these autobiographical accounts than previous studies. Thus, it will more patiently examine these points of change or development and better indentify the earlier and later positions.

Seventhly, this will be a sample-study in the second generation of the Reformation — its relationship to the magisterial reformers and the question of ongoing or further reformation. A study of liberty, ecclesiology, and eschatology through the perspective of Owen provides a unique look into the unity and diversity of Reformed Orthodoxy in general. A recent collection of essays examines many of the in-house debates within British Reformed Orthodoxy. These intramural controversies were just that — they were both within the bounds of Reformed confessionalism and at times hotly debated. In some of these controversies Owen is consistently on the same side throughout his life (e.g., the imputation of Christ’s obedience or the extent of the atonement). But with other doctrines, as we have seen in this chapter, he can be found on different sides of a debate at different times in his life. Therefore, the matters examined in this study are not only important for understanding Owen’s life and thought, but they contribute to the ongoing discussion about the nature of Reformed Orthodoxy — its unity, diversity, boundaries, and debates. In a sense, Owen is, all by himself, a testimony of the

---

109 Toon’s biography, for example, introduces Owen as “a man into whose innermost thoughts and feelings it is difficult if not impossible to enter. Not one of John Owen’s diaries has been preserved” and “the extant letters in which he lays bare his soul are very few ...” (God’s Statesman, p. vii).

110 Haykin and Jones, eds., Drawn into Controversies: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Reformed Puritanism.

111 The essays in Drawn into Controversies cover the debates: imputation of Christ’s obedience, church government, millenarianism, lapsarian views, extent of the
debates and diversity since he comes to disagree with his former self on a number of points.

Chad Van Dixhoorn has demonstrated that the Westminster Assemblymen shared a breadth of opinions about what “reformation” meant for a British church settlement in the 1640s, some believing that they had been tasked by Parliament with “reforming the reformation.” Their different understandings of and approaches to reformation, in fact, stood at the heart of many of their debates, according to Van Dixhoorn. As will be shown here, Owen is an intriguing example of a tension between Reformed/reforming identities in his time. He is neither whimsical nor overly inventive in his approach to theology. Indeed, any changes or developments in his thinking still keep him firmly within the bounds of confessional Reformed Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, his views on politics, liberty, confessionalization, as with points of ecclesiology, and especially eschatology, are departures (or developments) from, say, Calvin. Like other Puritans in his time, he was very much concerned for “further reformation” in Britain. This study will seek to determine Owen’s parameters for these Reformed/reforming identities and intentions.

V. The Method and Scope of this Study

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 of this study will provide a brief biographical sketch of Owen’s life and activities.


Proceeding chapters will return to parts of Owen’s life and times to explore elements in greater detail; however, Chapter 2 will provide a broad narrative of key events, people, and issues.

Chapter 3 will turn to Owen’s involvement in the efforts toward “setting up the kingdom” in the days when Puritans were in power, especially through their multiple constitutional and confessional attempts to settle a Cromwellian church-state in the 1650s. Owen was heavily involved in these ecclesiastical politics. The complex and sometimes competing goals of further reformation, godly rule, liberty, purity, orthodoxy, limiting heresy, and unifying the godly can all fall under the banner of a “theology and politics of confessionalization.” Special attention will be given to the lengthy and terribly-neglected Preface to the Savoy Assembly’s work (1658) — quite possibly written by Owen — which is very telling for Owen’s hopes and aims for England at that time; for the confessional purposes of the Savoy meetings; for the Congregationalists’ relationship to the State; and for their overall view of confessions and confessional formulation. This chapter will also seek to explore possible sources for Owen’s views of government, national religion, liberty, and unity. Lastly it will consider the same themes in Owen’s post-1662 experience of nonconformity to show consistencies and flexibility in these disenfranchising years.

Chapter 4 will explore elements of Owen’s local church ecclesiology, specifically those which are integral to his move from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism. Foremost for that move was the question of the recipients of “keys of the kingdom” in Matt. 16:19. In a lengthy autobiographical account Owen tells of the key influence John Cotton’s work, The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven (1644), had on his conversion to Congregationalism. While this much has been noted in numerous studies of Owen there has not been a consensus on the timing of this ecclesiological change, nor the reasons for it, his earlier position, or even the consistency of his later position. This chapter seeks to

114 “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19, ESV).
Introduction

offer a more thorough examination of Owen’s ecclesiological evolution, determining his earliest views and the first signs of his Congregational convictions. It also compares Owen’s fully bloomed Congregationalism with those of his contemporaries, especially Cotton. The chapter ends by returning to the issue of liberty to consider the relationship between ecclesiology and liberty and to explore whether there was any inherent connection between the Congregationalist’s ecclesiology and their typical view of liberty.

Chapter 5 turns to the “Coming of the kingdom,” or “eschatology and its political-ecclesiastical significance.” Owen’s view, labeled “latter-day glory” in his day, grew out of the interpretation of key apocalyptic scriptural texts, but also the interpretation of providence. Not surprisingly, this hopeful eschatology grew in popularity and optimism in the hopeful circumstances of the Puritan Revolution. Everything from military victories and the king’s execution to the seasons of peace and signs of unity around further reformation were interpreted eschatologically. It has been axiomatic, then, for many Owen-studies to assume that Puritan persecution in the post-Restoration era was too much for this optimistic eschatology, which was so tied to observable signs that it necessarily faltered in these years. This chapter re-examines that thesis by considering subtle theological underpinnings which were laid in Owen’s earliest and most hopeful Revolutionary years. It also returns to the themes of liberty and ecclesiology in earlier chapters to show that eschatology was something of an epistemological cornerstone upon which Owen’s view of nation, liberty, and church were built.

Chapter 6, in conclusion, will summarize the primary observations, and seek to more directly answer the questions raised in this Introduction.

This will not be a comprehensive analysis of these doctrinal issues in Owen, let alone his contemporaries. It will give primary attention to those details which provide a deeper understanding of any changes or developments in his thought, and secondary attention to those questions which have been neglected or debated in the secondary literature. As a result, the theological
portrait that emerges at the end should provide some insight into the nature of Reformed and Puritan movements, of which Owen was no insignificant figure.
Chapter 2

A Biographical Sketch of John Owen

Carl Trueman captured well the paradox of John Owen’s importance and forgotteness in history:

Owen was without a doubt the most significant theological intellect in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, and one of the two or three most impressive Protestant theologians in Europe at the time. It was his misfortune, however, to be put on the losing side: for Owen was a Puritan and allied to the Independent party in the struggles which tore England apart in the 1640s and 1650s; as such he was one of history’s losers; and, as history is generally written by those who win, Owen was swiftly written out of intellectual history of England in the aftermath of the Great Ejection of 1662 when non-conformists were not simply expelled from the Church of England, but excluded from the establishment, political, cultural, and intellectual ....¹

Of course, as the last chapter suggested, today Owen is less a forgotten relic of theology’s past and more increasingly a worthy study in intellectual history.² Nevertheless, his rise to prominence and fall from favor is indeed part of the meta-narrative of his life. He was tied to the Puritan project in mid-seventeenth century Britain for better or worse — in days of apparent success and seeming defeat. This chapter seeks to briefly tell the story of

¹ Trueman, John Owen, p. 1.
² Consider the testimonies to Owen on the backmatter of The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology: John Webster understands Owen to be “one of the most distinguished minds of the seventeenth century,” and Oliver Crisp suggests that he is “arguably one of the most important Reformed theologians to have written in the English language.”
Owen’s life and times, the events and endeavors, the ups and downs, which all gave shape and context to the theological analyses that follow in subsequent chapters.3

I. Years of Preparation (1616-43)

Very little is known of Owen’s childhood. His own brief testimony may be one of the clearest windows into the religious atmosphere of his home: “I was bred up from my infancy under the care of my father, who was a Nonconformist all his days, and a painful labourer in the vineyard of the Lord.”4 Thanks to the generosity of a wealthy uncle Owen began university preparatory education at the age of ten. Two years later he entered Queen’s College in the University of Oxford — an institution with which Owen would have recurring and diverse relations in the years to come. He graduated in 1632 and again with an MA in 1635.5 He then entered the seven-year-long bachelor of divinity program at Oxford. However, throughout the 1630s, the strict leadership of Archbishop William Laud made studies difficult for those like Owen with Calvinistic and puritanical persuasions. Laud increasingly enforced rituals of high liturgy. An Arminian with a strong distaste for Calvinism, he forbade any debates on predestination among the faculty and students. Two years into his studies for the BD, a frustrated Owen withdrew from Oxford. Of course, the ecclesiological and theological agenda of Laud (and shared by King Charles I) stretched far beyond Oxford; thus,

---


throughout the 1630s two very different visions for England’s church were emerging and growing in tension.\(^6\)

From 1637 to 1642 Owen served as family chaplain to two wealthy estates, the end of which related to the eruption of civil war between King and Parliament. Owen sided with Parliament’s cause, while his employer was sympathetic to the royalists. Thus, there was a parting of the ways, and Owen moved to London.\(^7\) Nevertheless, it was shortly after this move that Owen heard a sermon which would have a profound impact on him. It seems that while he had long confessed an orthodox gospel he still lacked assurance. But when an unknown, stand-in preacher took Matt. 8:26 for his text — “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” — it was then that God spoke “peace to his soul,” removed “all his doubts,” and brought “solid peace and comfort which he afterwards enjoyed as long as he lived.”\(^8\)

II. Pastoral Ministry (1643-49)

In the same year of that momentous sermon, Owen published his first of many books to follow — a polemical treatment of Arminianism.\(^9\) Dedicated to Parliament’s committee on religion, the work was well received, and he was soon appointed to “the living” (or pastoral call) of the church in Fordham in Essex. It was there that he married Mary Rook, who would eventually bear eleven children — though all but one would die as infants or young children.

Owen’s next publication was a modest work of ecclesiology, and indeed grew out of a single sermon (“an hour’s country discourse”).\(^10\) Astutely aware of emerging differences between Presbyterians and Independents, Owen — though a confessed


\(^7\) His siding with Parliament and move to London also cost him the financial support of his benevolent uncle who was a “zealous royalist,” according to Asty (“Memoirs of … Owen,” p. iv).


\(^10\) The *Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* (1643), in *Works*, 13:3.
Presbyterian at this time — sought to commend a judicious, non-partisan middle path between “democratical confusion” and “hierarchical tyranny.”

By 1646 Owen was garnering wider public attention. That April, he preached for Parliament at the young age of thirty. Soon after he was appointed to the large parish of St. Peter’s, Coggeshall, succeeding the august Puritan Obadiah Sedgwick. There, alongside the broader public ministry of St. Peter’s, Owen formed a group of covenanted “visible saints.” This was a typical practice among the Congregationalist Puritans; thus, an ecclesiological transformation evidently took place sometime before moving to Coggeshall. Owen later explained his evolution from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism, giving primary credit to the New Englander, John Cotton, and his recent defense of Congregationalism, The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven (1644).

Cotton had already been influential on the ecclesiological formation of the so-called “Dissenting Brethren” of the Westminster Assembly. While Cotton’s immediate influence on Owen was via print, in the ensuing years the two corresponded and aided each other. In many ways, Owen eventually came to succeed Cotton as the unofficial chief spokesman of the Congregational way on both sides of the Atlantic. However, in the mid-1640s Cotton’s work was as controversial as it was influential. Samuel Rutherford, Robert Ballie, and other notable Presbyterians wrote against it.

---

11 Pastors and People, in Works, 13:5.
13 Owen was not formally installed at St. Peter’s until Aug. 18, 1646, but he was likely functionally filling the vacancy of St Peter’s as early as May of that year. See Thomas Davids, Annals of Evangelical Nonconformity in the County of Essex (London, 1863), p. 398.
14 For Owen’s account of his move from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism, see Works, 13:222-23.
15 See Powell, “The Dissenting Brethren and the Power of the Keys.”
16 For example, Owen saw to the publication of one of Cotton’s previously unpublished manuscripts, adding a 100-page preface of his own to the work: A Defence of Mr. John Cotton (1658).
17 See Bremer, Congregational Communion, passim.
Despite the best efforts of the Congregationalists at Westminster, a Presbyterian proposal had been approved by the Assembly and handed off to Parliament. It was then that Owen entered the fray of ecclesiastical debate with the publication, “A Country Essay for the Practice of Church Government” (1646). With the threat of Presbyterian uniformity looming on the horizon, Owen proposed an accommodation between the two parties and pleaded for liberty in matters of ecclesiastical practice such as forms of worship, polity, and discipline. It was a rather audacious move, proposing in so short a document a solution to the debates and divisions that occupied Westminster Assembly for months. It garnered little if any attention. However, it set the stage for two themes to which Owen would frequently return in years ahead: (1) uniting “the godly” (Protestants or Reformed) in Britain, and (2) liberty, not demanded conformity, on matters of ecclesiastical practice.

Owen’s ministry in Coggeshall brought him into contact with leaders of the Parliament’s New Model Army who were headquartered in nearby Colchester in mid-1648. He was invited to preach to the troops on multiple occasions, each time encouraging them that they were instruments in the Lord’s hands for executing justice and liberating the church from oppression. The contours of Owen’s eschatology begin to emerge here. Like many of his Puritan brethren, he believed in a “latter-day glory” which would include the spread of the gospel, the flourishing of true churches, and the crumbling of those things which stand in opposition to Christ. The army’s cause against the king was part of this apocalyptic expectancy, and their victories were apparent proof that this latter-day kingdom was dawning on England.

Owen’s ministry to the troops was more than celebrated; he became close personal friends with General Thomas Fairfax and

---

18 In Works, 8:49-69.  
19 Owen, in fact, admits that he spent only a few hours writing the essay (see Works, 8:44).  
20 The sermons were published together as Ebenezer: A Memorial of the Deliverence in Essex (1649), in Works, 8:77-126.  
21 See Works, 8:101.
Reformed and Reforming

Henry Ireton, son-in-law of Oliver Cromwell. It was Ireton who authored *The Remonstrance of the Army* in November 1648, thereby abandoning further negotiations with King Charles and more than hinting at the possibility of the king’s execution for the charge of treason. The writing was on the wall, not only for the king’s demise, but for Owen’s prominence with the army’s elite and his proximity to the highest religious-political affairs.

III. Affairs of the State (1648-58)

A. Parliamentary Preacher

Owen was scheduled to preach to Parliament once again on January 31, a routinely scheduled “fast-day” for the assembly. However, the events of the preceding day made the occasion anything but routine. On January 30 England’s king was beheaded for treason. Owen’s sermon to Parliament the following day was neither triumphalistic nor timid.22 It called England’s leaders to humility and sobriety, but also to further resolve in the cause of Christ for the nation. Owen clearly had no objection to Parliament’s course with the king. With apocalyptic verve he encouraged them that God had called them “for the rolling up of the nation’s heavens like a scroll;” they were serving the Lord “in the high places of Armageddon.”23 Owen attached an essay to the publication, “Of Toleration, and the Duty of the Magistrate about Religion.”24 In subsequent Parliamentary sermons, he returned to the familiar themes of toleration, divine blessing, the “latter-day,” resolve, and personal piety.

One such sermon, in April of 1649, was delivered for the first time in the hearing of Oliver Cromwell.25 Following the sermon the two met in the home of General Fairfax. Reportedly, Cromwell said, “Sir, you are the man I must be acquainted with.”

22 Published as *Righteous Zeal Encouraged by Divine Protection* (1649), in *Works*, 8:127-65.
23 *Works*, 8:129.
To which Owen smoothly responded, “That will be much more to my advantage than to yours.” Cromwell then “invited” Owen to join him in his military campaign in Ireland (Owen resisted the invitation until Cromwell wrote to Owen’s church to release him to the Commander). Owen served as Cromwell’s chief religious advisor and chaplain to the army of 12,000 men. Owen was also tasked with investigating Trinity College, Dublin for potential use in “the good old cause.” It seems that Owen’s occupation with Trinity College kept him from witnessing, let alone encouraging, the infamous massacre that Cromwell’s army laid upon the city of Drogheda. In fact, upon returning from Ireland, Owen preached an impassioned sermon to Parliament envisioning a campaign of another kind in Ireland:

How is it that Jesus Christ is in Ireland only as a lion staining all his garments with the blood of his enemies; and none to hold him out as a lamb sprinkled with his own blood to his friends? ... [Oh that] the Irish might enjoy Ireland so long as the moon endureth, so that Jesus Christ might possess the Irish. ... God hath been faithful in doing great things for you; be faithful in this one,—do your utmost for the preaching of the gospel in Ireland. ... If their be gospelless move not our hearts, it is hoped their importunate cries will disquiet our rest, and wrest help as a beggar doth an alms.

While there is no direct explicit how Owen’s appeal was received by Parliament, a week later the House passed the “Act for the better advancement of the Gospel and Learning in Ireland,” which funded several trustees, academicians, and ministers to Ireland. Owen continued to have significant influence in 1650

---

26 This was a phrase used by Parliamentarians and soldiers in the Puritan Revolution. See Austin Woolrych, “The Good Old Cause and the Fall of the Protectorate,” *Cambridge Historical Journal* 13 (1957) 133-61. Owen uses it in “God’s Work in Founding Zion” (1656), in *Works*, 8:425.


28 For further details, see Toon, *God’s Statesman*, p. 42.
Reformed and Reforming

as he served as Preacher to the Palace of Whitehall\textsuperscript{29} and twice accompanied Cromwell to Scotland.

With his next appointment, Owen was again reluctant, and yet it came to occupy one of the longer tenures of his life.

B. Leading Oxford University

In early 1651 the House of Commons appointed Owen as Dean of Christ Church, Oxford. In light of Owen’s now famous intellectual stature and general capability, it is surprising to learn that he felt academically, intellectually, and socially inadequate for the task.\textsuperscript{30} Though he protested the appointment, his objections were overruled by the House. The following year Cromwell appointed him to the highest academic post in the University — Vice-Chancellor. Once again Owen resisted, and once again his wishes were overruled.

By any reckoning, the University was in disarray by the early 1650s — structurally, academically, administratively, and spiritually. Oxford had been little more than military headquarters for the king’s army in the previous decade; at least three battles took place on its streets during the civil wars. As Toon states, “The University had virtually ceased to exist as a centre of learning.”\textsuperscript{31} While Owen may have been a reluctant leader, and though the task of repairing and reforming the University was indeed great, he did not prove to be an inadequate or ineffective administrator.\textsuperscript{32} Of course, he did not receive universal praise. Anthony Wood’s early history of Oxford mocked

\textsuperscript{29} Whitehall was the royal residence in London throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and functioned as the political headquarters during the Interregnum (the years when England was without a king, 1649-60).

\textsuperscript{30} See Owen’s account of his reluctance in Works, 10:492-93.

\textsuperscript{31} Toon, God’s Statesman, p. 51.

Owen’s fashionable appearance. Yet, even a critic like Wood acknowledged Owen’s general likeability and success.

As for Owen’s own assessment of his tenure at Oxford, his report on the state of the University on the eve of his resignation from the Vice-Chancellorship attests to many successes, many ongoing needs, and a general relief that such a great burden would now be passed to someone else! It is a frequent mistake in the secondary literature to view this transition as a removal rather than a resignation. Of course, Owen (with others) had just recently taken a stand against Cromwell taking the crown; and consequently, there does seem to have been some breach in the relationship between the two. However, Owen’s farewell speech makes clear that it was indeed a resignation. He remained as Dean of Christ Church until 1660. In the case of that transition, it was a predominantly Presbyterian Parliament that removed Owen, replacing him with one of their own.

C. Attempts at a Cromwellian Church Settlement

Throughout the 1650s, in addition to labors in Oxford, Owen was involved in a dizzying number of committees and projects related to ecclesiastical politics. Though the Presbyterianism recommended by Westminster Assembly had been passed into law in 1648, it had been poorly established, let alone enforced. Besides, the majority of those in power in the early 1650s were, broadly speaking, concerned more with liberty than ecclesiastical uniformity. Also, Congregationalists, not Presbyterians, were increasingly having sway with those now in

---

33 Wood writes of Owen: “He scorned all familiarity and undervalued his office by going in quirpo like a young scholar, with powdered hair, snakebone bandstrings, ... a large set of ribbands pointed, at his knees, and Spanish leather boots, with large lawn tops, and his hat mostly cock’d.” *Athenae Oxoniensis* (1691), vol. 4, col. 98.

34 See Wood, *Athenae Oxoniensis*, vol. 4, col. 102. Owen was known as a firm but fair disciplinarian; yet, he turned a blind eye to private Prayer Book services which were held at the University (which had been deemed illegal in post-Laudian England).


power. It was clear to many, then, that England would once again need to “settle” her religion and church.

In 1652 Owen and other Congregationalist ministers submitted a petition to Parliament for the re-settling of England’s national church. Titled The Humble Proposals, it called for the banning of the recently re-published Socinian Racovian Catechism and, more proactively, for a statement of fundamental articles to be owned by the state.\(^{37}\) The Proposals allowed for peaceable disagreement with the doctrinal standard, but did not permit attacks in print or preaching. Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists could all assent to it. While Cromwell’s dissolution of the Parliament made the Proposals unsuccessful, the same basic direction was followed the next year when the Instrument of Government was passed, giving England its first Commonwealth constitution. Ecclesiastically, the Instrument included a system of ministerial approbation and removal, called the “triers” and “ejecters” respectively. Owen served as one of the “triers.”

A number of confessional committees were assembled in the mid-1650s, either organically and unofficially, or by the summons of the Lord Protector, Cromwell. Owen played a prominent role in each of them. Made up of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists, these committees variously drew up lines of inclusion and exclusion for England’s church, but they shared several general aims: to “unite the godly” (Protestant/Reformed) under one national church without making specific rules for worship and discipline in local churches; to allow liberty for any who peaceably dissent from the state’s principles of orthodoxy; but to also hold out a standard of sound orthodoxy and promote gospel preaching in the land, and beyond.\(^{38}\) Owen saw this as the

\(^{37}\) These sixteen doctrines were published as “Principles of the Christian Religion” (December 1652).

\(^{38}\) In typically puritanical fashion, the rest of the title describes its aims quite thoroughly: “... for the furtherance and propagation of the Gospel in this nation. Wherein they having had equall respects to all persons fearing God, though of differing judgements, doe hope also that they will tend to union and peace. With additionall propositions humbly tendred to the Committee for propagating the Gospel, as easie and speedy means for supply of all parishes in England with able, godly, and orthodox ministers. For, setting of right constituted churches, and for preventing persons of corrupt judgements, from publishing dangerous errors, and blasphemies in assemblies and meetings, by other godly persons, ministers, and others.
work of “further reformation.” It was nothing less than Christ “gathering ... his church, ... setting up his kingdom, the establishment of his throne.” In many ways, the Savoy Assembly (1658) and its documents were a culmination of confessional attempts and ecclesiastical efforts in the previous years.

While the 1650s often looked promising to many in the Puritan cause, the final years of the decade proved otherwise.

IV. The Experience of Defeat (1658-83)

As the Savoy Assembly drew up its documents, the nation was quickly changing. Oliver Cromwell died, leaving his son Richard to succeed him as Lord Protector. Unlike his father, Richard favored Presbyterianism. A rift was beginning to grow between the two main parties. Owen’s sermon to Parliament in January 1659 betrays his anxiety about England’s instability at the time. Divisions between Richard and army officers, and divisions within Parliament itself, led to the Lord Protector’s (forced) resignation less than a year after his installation.

Many have accused Owen as having a hand, if not being a primary mover, in Richard’s termination. Owen denied the charge outright. Perhaps it was little more than a matter of guilt by association, since Owen was a friend of the army officers leading the charge against Richard. Owen had, in that same year, formed a London church made up of many officers, which met at Lord Fleetwood’s residence, Wallingford House. Wallingford House soon became synonymous with the group of men responsible for Richard’s overthrow. As friend, pastor, and unofficial advisor to men like Fleetwood, Owen surely had conversations about

---

40 Whether the Savoy Assembly had similar politico-ecclesiastical purposes as the earlier confessional formulations in the decade is a matter which has been debated by scholars since. This issue will be examined in the next chapter.
41 See Works, 8:454-71.
42 See Works, 16:274.
Reformed and Reforming

political upheavals and maneuvers, but there is little hard evidence to tie Owen to a plot.\(^{43}\)

The vacuum left by Richard and the rather chaotic state of Parliament led to the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. A string of new laws soon followed, placing increasing restrictions on nonconformists and non-royalists. The Corporation Act (1661) prohibited them from holding public office. The Act of Uniformity (1662) enforced use of the newly revised Prayer Book. In one day, 2000 Puritan ministers were expelled from their pulpits for refusing to conform.\(^{44}\) The Conventicle Act (1662) made it illegal for nonconformists to meet together. The Five Mile Act (1665) barred nonconformist ministers from lodging within five miles of any previous pastorate. Together this so-called “Clarendon Code” of laws was proof that Laudianism was once again alive and well.

While many Puritans faced prolonged jail time for their nonconformity, Owen was, for reasons unknown, largely left unbothered for much of the post-Restoration years. It was certainly not due to his compliance to the anti-Puritan laws, as it was rather well known that he held church services in his home — services attended by many of the top brass in the New Model Army.\(^{45}\) He also made formal appeals and proposals to the king to allow liberty for those who, due to conscience, could not conform to the church’s worship and polity, but otherwise could ascribe to the doctrine in the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. He wrote dozens of tracts and essays which sought to make the case for liberty and argue for the orthodoxy of his Puritan brethren.\(^{46}\)

---

\(^{43}\) See the thorough analysis in Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter*, pp. 243-57.

\(^{44}\) Though understandably biased, Edmund Calamy’s account is still a reliable and thorough account of Puritan persecution in post-Restoration England: *The Church and the Dissenters Compar’d as to Persecution* (1719); *Continuation of the Account* (1727); A.G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised: Being a Revision of Edmund Calamy’s Account of the Ministers and Others Ejected and Silenced, 1660-2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934).

\(^{45}\) Owen was indicted in February 1665 for holding church at his home, but he was never formally charged. See Greaves, “Owen, John,” *ODNB*. For Owen’s post-Restoration sermons, see works, vol. 9.

\(^{46}\) For example: *A Discourse Concerning Litturgies* (1662), in works, 15:1ff; *Indulgence and Toleration Considered* (1667); in works, 13:518ff; *Indulgence and Toleration Considered* (1667), in works, 13:518ff; *A Peace-Offering, in an Apology and Humble Plea*
Owen was not left without alternatives to such circumstances. The Congregational Church of Boston, Massachusetts — once pastored by John Cotton — sought Owen as their pastor. Harvard College sought his advice and aid in their search for a new president, which was likely a subtle step towards expressing their interest in Owen. Nevertheless, he remained in England and continued to labor behind the scenes for the relief of the persecuted. Perhaps most notably, Owen made arrangements for the publication of John Bunyan’s now-classic *Pilgrim’s Progress* while the “Tinker-Preacher” was imprisoned. Owen was fond of Bunyan, having heard him preach many times. King Charles II apparently once asked Owen why such a learned man as himself would bother to listen to the preaching of an uneducated “tinker” like Bunyan. To which Owen replied, “Could I possess the tinker’s ability for preaching, please your majesty, I would gladly relinquish all my learning.”

Owen remained a busy author through his later years, writing on various aspects of ecclesiology and liberty, on sanctification and communion, on doctrinal and polemical matters; and producing a massive exposition of the book of Hebrews. He continued to minister and preach as well, despite painful illnesses and the increasing threat of prosecution. In late-1681 he was subpoenaed for violating the Five-Mile Act and faced heavy fines.

---

47 Quoted in Asty, “Memoirs of ... Owen,” p. v. xxx; Toon, God’s Statesman, p. 162.

48 Owen’s works on ecclesiology are found in *Works*, vols. 13-16

49 For example: *Nature and Causes of Apostasy* (1676); *On Spiritual Mindedness* (1681); *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer* (1682); *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (1684).

50 Such as: *Reason of Faith* (1677); *Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God* (1678); *The Person of Christ* (1678); *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (1684); *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (1677); *The Reason of Faith* (1677); *The Person of Christ* (1678).

51 Originally published in four folio volumes (1668, 1674, 1680, and 1684), Owen’s *Exposition of Hebrews* is found in *Works*, vols. 18-24.
Fewer than six months before his death, a grand jury indicted him for preaching to conventicles (nonconformist church meetings). Two months later he was arrested once again—in this case, for suspicion of involvement in the Rye House plot to assassinate Charles II. It is almost surely the case that Owen was innocent of active involvement in the plot; but, once again, he was close to men who were clearly conspiring (such as Robert Ferguson). Further suspicion may also have been raised by Owen’s recent endorsement of the right to bear arms against a government. Whatever the case, he remained in the thick of England’s troubled times throughout his days.

On August 24, 1683, Owen died at his home, having suffered from a kidney stone too large to pass. Six years later the Act of Toleration removed the Clarendon Code laws, which granted ecclesiastical freedom to nonconformists, but also forbade any formal comprehension among nonconformist groups. The Puritan project that Owen and others labored to advance slowly dissolved—though the kingdom of Christ certainly lives on.

---

52 See Greaves, “Owen, John,” ODNB.
54 One of the plotters confessed to the king that Owen was aware of the conspiracy. See Greaves, “Owen, John,” ODNB.
55 A Brief and Impartial Account of the Protestant Religion (1682), in Works, 14:537. To be clear, Owen qualified and limited this “right”: it is only when citizens have a legal right to protect themselves that they can do so.
Chapter 3

Setting Up the Kingdom:
The Theology and Politics of Confessionalization

For John Owen, the kingdom of Christ is more than an invisible, internal reality for individual saints. It is also manifested externally, corporately, and (ideally) civilly – that is, through a godly magistrate for “propagating of the kingdom of Christ, and the setting up of the standard of the gospel.”¹ Rulers are to rule, says Owen, “according to the interest of Christ and his gospel, and to seek the advancement of his scepter.”² Their power is in “subserviency to the kingdom of Christ, for the true spiritual advantage of his people.”³ In this complex and contextually nuanced intersection of religion and government, issues of reformation, unity, purity, liberty, and confessionalization also intersect. This chapter, therefore, seeks to examine the dynamics of Owen’s thought on the kingdom of Christ as a national entity, especially in the context of the 1650s when he was on the forefront of politico-ecclesiastical influence, and intimately involved in several attempts at (re)set up the kingdom in Britain.

¹ Portions of this chapter were originally presented at the John Owen Today conference in Cambridge, UK (2008), and later published as “Reformed or Reforming?: John Owen and the Complexity of Theological Codification in Mid-Seventeenth-Century,” in The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology, Kapic and Jones, eds., pp. 3-29. I am grateful for the feedback on my paper and for the numerous informal conversations during the conference.
² This phrase comes from Owen’s sermon to Parliament, “The Steadfastness of the Promises and the Sinfulness of Staggering” (1649), in Works, 8:235.
³ Owen, A Vindication of the Treatise on the True Nature of Schism (1657), in Works, 9:211.
⁴ Owen, “God’s Presence with his People the Spring of their Prosperity” (1656), in Works, 8:445.
I. Background: Reformation and Confessionalization

The movement of Protestant Orthodoxy has been defined by Richard Muller as “the codification and institutionalization of the Reformation …, consisting in the confessional character of its theology and piety …, in continuity and also discontinuity with strands in the religious past, all with elements of response and adaptation to the changing political, social, and intellectual contexts of Protestantism.” In other words, a right understanding of the unity and diversity of the Reformed tradition significantly rests upon a right understanding of their use of confessions and intentions for confessionalization. Muller has argued that between the standard Reformation and Orthodox confessions there emerges an understood essential Reformed confessional identity; and yet, each confessional attempt clearly had its own distinctiveness as well: its own perceived need, assembly, doctrinal emphases, polemical aims, politico-ecclesiastical relationship, and intended use and boundaries. Thus, however doctrinally similar

---

4 Muller, After Calvin, p. 47.


the early Reformed confessions might be, the truth remains that, many times over, a new confession was written or a current one revised. To better understand why, more investigation of individual confessions and their respective contexts is needed.

An excellent example of this need being met is Chad Van Dixhoorn’s 2004 Cambridge PhD dissertation on the meetings of the Westminster Assembly. From his discovery of the missing pages of John Lightfoot’s journal, Van Dixhoorn demonstrates that the longest-running debate of the Assembly was not on church government, as basically all of the previous research on the Assembly has suggested, but on the nature of creed-making itself.7 His study provides a clear window into the complexities for the codification of Reformed theology in the seventeenth century. The dilemmas and debates (most not unique to the Westminster Assembly) are worth listing for their relevance to this chapter:

- What significance should be given to the ancient creeds – e.g., the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds? Should they be included; can they be altered?
- Should a confessional need be met with an altogether new confession or with a revision of a current (or ancient) one?
- What is the relationship between a creed and Scripture, and how should that relationship be communicated in the creed, if at all?
- How theologically comprehensive and specific should a confession be – the fullest confession possible, just fundamental articles, or something in between?
- What are the “fundamental articles” – i.e., Which doctrines are fundamental and necessary to saving faith?
- What are the ministerial and political intentions for the confession?
- How shall the codification of orthodoxy, the limiting of heresy, and the growing concern for liberty and toleration be negotiated?8

---

7 Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming the Reformation,” 1:213.
Throughout the English Revolution these confessional questions continued to receive much debate and gave birth to new experiments. After Parliament’s war with and execution of King Charles I in 1649, England was in disarray. The Presbyterianism enacted by Parliament in 1648 had been poorly established, and by anyone’s reckoning a new government would need to be established. For many of those now with power it was also nigh time to re-settle the England’s church. Both New Model Army and Parliament held a growing number of Independent, Congregationalists, or otherwise more progressive Puritans in its ranks. The growing sentiment was for a church without any demanded conformity to and persecution for matters of ecclesiastical practice — i.e., church government and forms of worship. They believed it was the magistrate’s duty to protect such religious liberties. Yet, like their Presbyterian brethren, they also believed that the magistrate had a responsibility to maintain godly civility, to expose and limit heresies, to promote and teach sound orthodoxy, and to provide for the examination and maintenance of England’s ministers.9

On the one hand, such ideals were, in theory, readily agreed upon by a significant majority of those now with sway. On the other hand, there were many different opinions as to how to best accomplish and balance these ideals in the state and its church. Like pieces of a pie, as one piece is made bigger, the others are inevitably made smaller. So it was with the concerns for liberty, civility, orthodoxy, purity, and unity, which were seen to be necessary and yet simultaneously in frequent tension.10 The

9 See Powell, “The Last Confession: A Background Study of the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order” (MPhil thesis, Univ. of Cambridge, 2008); “The Dissenting Brethren and the Power of the Keys.” This point will also be further demonstrated throughout this study.

precarious balance of these ideals and differing opinions about them is no doubt part of the explanation for the multiple confessional attempts in so short a time as the 1650s. Owen and the “Dissenting Brethren” of the Westminster Assembly played no small role in these confessional formulations and the legislative proposals surrounding them.  

This, according to Owen, was the “founding of Zion” for “the common interest of the saints,”

the “propagating of the kingdom of Christ, and the setting up of the standard of the gospel.”

One historian has referred to Owen specifically as “the architect of the Cromwellian church.”
And yet the question of Owen’s approach to confessionalization (with the connected issues of liberty, purity, and ecclesiastical legislation) is on the whole a terribly neglected subject in Owen studies. Where these matters have received analysis the focus has been limited either to Owen’s early few works on toleration or his post-Restoration

---

11 The Dissenting Brethren — Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Sidrach Sympson, Jeremiah Burroughs, and William Bridge — submitted The Apologetical Narration to Parliament in 1644 as a defense of their Congregationalist beliefs at the Westminster Assembly. Owen was not a member of the Assembly most likely because of his youth and still relative anonymity. However, throughout the 1650s, Owen, Goodwin, Nye, Sympson, and Bridge were the preeminent religious statesmen — what Tai Liu calls the “Dissenting Brethren-John Owen group” in Tai Liu, Discord in Zion: The Puritan Divines and the Puritan Revolution 1640-1660 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), p. 122.

12 From Owen’s sermon, “God’s Work in Founding Zion,” (1656) in Works, 8:421.


Reformed and Reforming

writings on the same. Of course, neither of those is an illegitimate approach to understanding Owen’s views. However, Owen’s role in the actual attempts of settling a Cromwellian church is equally as telling. In other words, Owen’s view of the kingdom of Christ as a national church can be gleaned from the legislative proposals and creeds themselves: The Humble Proposals (1652), The Instrument of Government (1653), The New Confession (1654), The Humble Petition and Advice (1657), and The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (1658). The majority of attention will be paid to the Savoy Assembly, due to its neglected, yet telling, Preface and the mysteries surrounding its historical purposes. Only after a thorough examination of these confessional projects will this chapter be in a good place to more briefly consider (a) the development of and sources for Owen’s views, and (b) the consistencies and/or changes of his views in the very different circumstances of post-Restoration nonconformity.


17 Unfortunately, in some of the most significant works on the history of confessionalization and confessional subscription, 1650s England is completely omitted: e.g., Hall, ed., The Practice of Confessional Subscription. Despite the promising subtitle, the work of Jean-Louis Quantin — The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of Confessional Identity in the 17th Century (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009) – gives very little attention to the 1650s in general and makes no mention of the formal confessional attempts that follow in this chapter. On the other hand, the political history of these years is captured well in an article by Sarah Cook, but with little analysis of the theological and confessional dynamics that were so foundational to the Settlement attempts: “The Congregational Independents and the Cromwellian Constitutions,” Church History 46 (1977) 335-57.
II. Attempts at a Cromwellian Church Settlement

A. The Humble Proposals (1652)

On February 10, 1652 the House of Commons passed the Act of Oblivion, and the Socinian John Biddle was set free from prison. Likely not coincidentally, on the same day, Owen and other ministers presented the House with a petition, a copy of a warrant, and a book. The book was the Socinian Racovian Catechism and the warrant was likely that which had been issued for the book by the Council of State two weeks earlier. It is clear from the Commons Journal that the petition called for not only an examination and suppression of the book, but a committee to be formed for “such proposals as shall be offered for the better propagation of the Gospel.” In other words, their concerns were both reactive and proactive. By the very next day, fifteen such proposals had been prepared and presented to the House: The Humble Proposals of Mr. Owen, Mr. Goodwin, Mr. Nye, Mr. Sympson, and other Ministers. In it they proposed the following:

18 Though the House continued to debate the exact parameters of the Act of Oblivion for much of the next week. See Journal of the House of Commons, 7:85-93.
19 Journal of the House of Commons, 7:85-86. Interestingly, Owen is the only one named in the Commons Journal (“Mr. Owen … with diverse ministers”), which likely indicates something of his prominence among his fellow ministers at the time.
21 Shortly after, a committee, which included Owen, Nye, Sympson, and others, presented Parliament with a thorough list of the heretical concerns in the catechism and recommended that it be burned. They also recommended that there be an examination of “Mr. Franc. Gouldman, Mr. Henry Walley, and Mr. John Milton” on these matters. Parliament ordered all of the recommendations except for the examination of John Milton (Journal of the House of Commons, 7:114). Not surprisingly Milton wrote a short time after, “new foes arise Threatening to bind our souls with secular chains.” See The Sonnets of John Milton, Mark Pattison, ed. (New York: New Amsterdam Book, 1904), p. 183. Milton explicitly mentions Owen as one of these “new foes” a few pages later (ibid., p. 188).
22 Journal of the House of Commons, 7:86. Officially, the name was “the Committee appointed to receive proposals for the better propagation of the gospel.”
that no one be required to receive the sacrament against their conscience;
that church attendance be nationally required, except for those whose conscience would keep them from such assemblies;
that any meetings outside of the public churches would need to give notice of their doings to a magistrate;
that dissent from “the doctrine and way of worship owned by the State” was permissible — so, presumably, there was to be no punishment for holding to heretical or non-Christian beliefs;
however, such dissenters were not “to preach or promulgate anything in opposition” to the “principles of Christian Religion.”

Perhaps most remarkable though is the way Owen and his compatriots took advantage of this open door with the Commons by essentially proposing an entire new church settlement.\(^\text{23}\) The first nine proposals relate to the approbation and maintenance of able and godly ministers. Though lacking clear and specific detail on several points, it was to be a system of ministerial vetting based on national and local committees and examiners. Formal ordination was not required for a pastoral appointment. The Humble Proposals provided the groundwork for what would become known as the systems of “triers” and “ejecters” in 1654.\(^\text{24}\)

But neither the Proposals, nor the “triers” or “ejecters” systems, had a formal doctrinal standard for ministerial examination such as the Westminster Confession of Faith (hereafter WCF) and Thirty-Nine Articles had previously served. For better or worse, ministerial

\(^{23}\) See Collins, “The Church Settlement of Oliver Cromwell,” 25. This is also made clear in Joseph Caryl’s lengthy (over 100 pages in the original) explanation and scriptural defense of the Humble Proposals: The Moderator: Endeavouring a full composure and quiet settlement of those many differences in doctrine and discipline, which have so long disturbed the peace and welfare of this Commonwealth; Intended (especially at this time) to beget a brotherly love and unity among ministers and people of all three Nations; the Parliament having now appointed a Committee for receiving Proposals for the Propagation of the Gospel (1652).

\(^{24}\) See Woolrych, Britain in Revolution, p. 556.
Setting Up the Kingdom: Confessionalization

approbation would become more dependent on the orthodoxy of those doing the examination rather than on a written confessional standard.  

The *Humble Proposals* did, however, imply the need for a future non-ministerial doctrinal standard, one that would simply define “those principles of the Christian religion without acknowledgement whereof ... salvation [cannot] be obtained.” Again, the *Proposals* insisted that dissenters not be allowed to “preach or promulgate anything in opposition unto such principles.” But such principles, or fundamental articles, would need to be defined, and, as John Coffey has noted, this was a “ticklish business” in the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, sometime before the end of March 1652 Owen and his brethren had drawn up sixteen “Principles of the Christian Religion.” Following the order of *loci* laid out by the Apostles’ Creed, the sixteen short fundamental articles represent basic Trinitarian and

---


27 These were included in the second printed edition of the *Proposals* under a new title: *Propositions for the Furtherance and Propagation of the Gospel*. Though not published until December 1652, it appears that the committee had these sixteen “Principles” alongside the *Proposals* sometime before March 31 when both were being discussed (Lawrence, “Thomas Goodwin and the Puritan Project,” p. 151). It is also worth noting that the first edition of the *Humble Proposals* contained “Additional Proposals” (another nine) which gave more specificity for the approbation of ministers and the forming of churches. However these “Additional Proposals” were removed in the second edition of its publication when the 16 “Principles” essentially replaced them.

evangelical orthodoxy. They were loose enough that the Arminian John Goodwin could sign them,29 and yet tight enough to keep Socinians outside of the lines of orthodoxy.30

Over the next year the proposals bounced between the committee and the House, occasionally receiving concentrated debate in Parliament.31 But with Cromwell’s move to dissolve the Rump Parliament in April 1653, hope for the Humble Proposals would also dissolve.32 Nevertheless, for the purposes of this chapter, a number of observations can be made. (1) Owen was shrewd if not opportunistic in his ecclesiastical politics in 1652. His concern for the promulgation of Socinianism was the impetus for action, but he coupled that concern with something far more proactive and comprehensive — essentially an entire new church-state. (2) Assumed throughout the Humble Proposals is the magistrate’s role in matters of religion — to constrain heresy, to protect liberty, to define orthodoxy, and to provide a basic system for ministerial approbation.33 (3) This proposal was a far more ecumenical than Britain’s most recent settlement: Westminster’s Presbyterianism. It was also more ecumenical, more concerned with accommodation and liberties, than the Congregationalist counterparts in New England.34 (4) It was neither a

30 For Owen’s critique of Baxter’s approach to confessionalization and liberty especially as it pertains to Socinians, see Works, 12:591-616. See also the analysis by Sarah Mortimer, Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 207-32.
32 Of course, the historical details were far more complicated than that. For insight into the complex, behind-the-scenes sectarianism working against the Humble Proposals, see Carolyn Polizzotto, “The Campaign Against The Humble Proposals of 1652,” Journal of Ecclesiastical History 38 (1987) 569-81. Also: Woolrych, Britain in Revolution, pp. 517-36; Blair Worden, The Rump Parliament (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 317-84.
33 Owen had already articulated this, first in an appendix to the printing of an earlier Parliamentary sermon, “A Country Essay for the Practice of Church Government,” (1646), in Works, 8:49-69. It was also the central theme of a later Parliamentary sermon, “Christ’s Kingdom and the Power of the Civil Magistrate” (October 1652), in Works, 8:367-95.
34 See Bremer, Congregational Communion, pp. 152-93.
Congregationalist proposal, nor a weak Presbyterianism. It was an interesting, if not unique, attempt to “unite the godly” (Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists) in these precarious times. (5) Fundamental articles played a central role in this confessionalizing, kingdom-settling effort.

B. The Instrument of Government (1653)

In October 1653, the Council of Officers passed the Instrument of Government, giving England its first written constitution. While Owen and his brethren continued to work with Cromwell toward the formation of a national church throughout that year, they were not the architects of the Instrument as they had been with the Humble Proposals. Nevertheless, the articles on religion in the Instrument followed a similar but not identical trajectory to that which Owen and others laid out in 1652. The Instrument explicitly called for a future national confession, one “less subject to scruple and contention, and more certain than the present.” The stated intentions for this confession in the Instrument are telling.

First, it would be “made for the encouragement and maintenance of able and painful teachers,” and thus provide an explicit confessional standard for the approbation of ministers, which the Humble Proposals had not included.

Second, those who “profess faith in God by Jesus Christ” would be “protected” in the “exercise” of their faith, even where it differed from “the doctrine, worship, or discipline” that is “publicly held forth” by the State. This liberty of conscience for doctrinal extra-fundamentals and matters of religious practice is certainly consistent with the Humble Proposals. However, the Instrument is surprisingly unspecific in defining those who “profess faith in God by Jesus Christ.” The Humble Proposals referred to

---

35 On the political and personal relationship between Owen and Cromwell, see Donald Leggett, “John Owen as Religious Adviser to Oliver Cromwell, 1649-1659” (MPhil thesis, Univ. of Cambridge, 2006).

“those principles ... without acknowledgement whereof ... salvation [cannot] be obtained,” and then defined those principles as Trinitarian and evangelical orthodoxy in the “Principles of Christian Religion.” But the Instrument more simply states that this liberty does not extend to those who disturb the peace, to “Popery or Prelacy,” or to the practice of licentiousness.\(^37\)

Third, while striking a then-common note of liberty — that “none shall be compelled by penalties” to hold to this “public profession” — the Instrument addressed in a seemingly fresh way the relationship between the “public profession” and those who dissent from it. Without state constraint, and yet without total complacency regarding those who dissent, The Instrument called for “endeavours [to] be used to win them by sound doctrine and the example of a good conversation.” The confession was simply to be “held forth and recommended.” Ann Hughes has shown that on this point the Instrument is borrowing much of its language from the 1649 Officers’ Agreement of the People.\(^38\) It, too, spoke of a “public profession” to be “held forth,” not “compelled,” but endeavoring to win over with sound doctrine and a good example.\(^39\) It deserves further investigation to see if Owen can be connected to the Agreement of the People and its language shared with the Instrument. For instance, in his 1648 work, Of Toleration, and the Duty of the Magistrate in Religion, Owen uses similar language, envisioning a “confession of that truth which he [the magistrate] embraceth,” to which “the churches ... consent,” to “hold out to these nations.”\(^40\)

\(^{37}\) Perhaps the lack of theological specificity in the Instrument is owed to being authored by an army general (John Lambert) as opposed to the theologian-pastors who crafted The Humble Proposals.


\(^{39}\) Constitutional Documents, pp. 369-70.

\(^{40}\) “Righteous Zeal Encouraged by Divine Protection” (1648), in Works, 8:204 (emphasis added). See also ibid., pp. 205-06. Previous historians have noted the general similarities between Owen’s view and that represented in the Agreement of the People: e.g., Gardiner, History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate, 2:97; R.S. Paul, Lord Protector: Religion and Politics in the Life of Oliver Cromwell (London, Lutterworth Press, 1955), pp. 256-57. However, neither Gardiner nor Paul entertained the linguistic similarities between Owen’s earlier writings and the Agreement.
Regardless, the Instrument shared a kindred spirit with the earlier Humble Proposals, and yet utilized earlier language of a “public profession,” while not imposed by the state, but owned by the nation, held out and encouraged to all. For Owen, these were essential tenets of Christ’s kingdom on earth. He had long preached that coercion, imposition, and fierce enforcement were antichristian. In 1649 he argued that it was “the great discovery of these days” that “ecclesiastical tyranny” was “Antichristian interest,” which Christ was now “shaking” and replacing with his own visible kingdom.\(^41\)

The question, however, still remains as to which later confession sought to fulfill that which was called for in the Instrument of Government. Until very recently, this was an utterly confused matter in the secondary literature. Peter Toon, for instance, refers to a draft of a confession that Owen and Thomas Goodwin had been composing in Oxford in April 1654.\(^42\) He also notes that Owen and Goodwin had been simultaneously serving a Cromwell-appointed committee. This group, made up of Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Baptist ministers, had been advised to frame a confession which would unite “the godly.” However, problematic for Toon was that a re-publication of the “Principles of the Christian Religion” — re-titled The Principles of Faith — was released at the same time. Though it was only a very slight revision of the “Principles” given to Parliament in 1652, Toon assumes that this is the confession that Cromwell had commissioned in connection with the Instrument of Government. Michael Lawrence, however, has more recently shown that a previously unexamined document, The New Confession (1654), is that which was intended to fulfill the confessional prescription of the Instrument.\(^43\) This is easily verified by the account in the Commons Journal where the “Articles of Faith” are also referred to

\(^41\) Owen, “The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth” (1649), in Works, 8:274. See also Owen’s earlier work “Of Toleration, and the Duty of the Magistrate about Religion” (1648), in Works, 8:201-06.

\(^42\) Toon, God’s Statesman, p. 95.

\(^43\) Lawrence, “Thomas Goodwin and the Puritan Project,” pp. 166-82. The only extant copy of The New Confession is now in the British Library (E.826.3). Its full text is reprinted as an appendix in Lawrence’s dissertation (pp. 224-27).
as “Twenty Articles,” of which The New Confession was uniquely comprised.\footnote{December 12, 1654, \textit{Journal of the House of Commons}, 7:399-400.}

\textbf{C. The New Confession (1654)}

As to doctrinal content, The New Confession moves toward more theological specificity when compared to the earlier “Principles” of fundamental articles connected to The Humble Proposals. Of course, it is far from the theological detail of the earlier WCF or the later Savoy Declaration of Faith (hereafter SDF), but, according to Lawrence, it is “more nuanced and tightly woven,” a “more explicitly Reformed statement of orthodoxy,” particularly on the doctrine of depravity.\footnote{Lawrence, “Thomas Goodwin and the Puritan Project,” p. 172.} Thus, “Arminians in particular would find it harder to subscribe” to The New Confession than the recently preceding confessions.\footnote{Lawrence, “Thomas Goodwin and the Puritan Project,” p. 172. Cf. Woolrych is no doubt correct but less nuanced when he writes that the Instruments “envisaged … a new confession …, less rigid than that of the Westminster Assembly. This was not attempted until 1658 …” (\textit{Britain in Revolution}, p. 566).} Apparently, this direction of a stricter confessionalism was also being reflected in the House. Less than a week before The New Confession was presented, Parliament voted to add the words “Reformed, Protestant” to the description of the nation’s faith.\footnote{December 7, 1654, \textit{Journal of the House of Commons}, 7:397 (emphasis added).}

Though he occasionally participated in the council which produced The New Confession, Richard Baxter was not at all pleased with its outcome.\footnote{Remarkably, the account of and grievances with the council and its confession run over eight pages in Baxter’s memoirs, \textit{Reliquiae Baxterianae} (1696), pp. 197-205.} He bemoaned the success of the “over-orthodox Doctors,” especially Owen, who articulated the fundamentals in “crude and unsound passages” in order to “obviate” heresies and other errors.\footnote{\textit{Reliquiae Baxterianae}, p. 199. Though perhaps not an objective account, Baxter concluded that the “great doer of all that worded the Articles was Dr. Owen” with Nye, Goodwin, and Symson functioning as his assistants (ibid., pp. 198-99). Though much briefer, Owen relayed his impressions of Baxter at the same council in \textit{Works}, 12:592-94, 603. For a study of the relational difficulties between Owen and Baxter,} Baxter, on the other hand,
suggested a three-part confessional subscription to the Lord’s Prayer, the Decalogue, and the Apostle’s Creed. He also believed that nothing should be imposed except the very words of Scripture. His understanding of sola Scriptura led him to lament the multiplying confessions of his day, believing that each one had drawn another unhelpful line between the people of God.\footnote{Paul Lim has argued that, for Baxter, the church’s purity was in its unity; its purification was to be pursued through its unification, and not vice-versa. See Lim, \textit{In Pursuit of Purity, Unity, and Liberty}, pp. 117-90. See also: Cooper, \textit{John Owen, Richard Baxter}, pp. 240-50; Carl Trueman, “Richard Baxter on Christian Unity: A Chapter in the Enlightenment of English Reformed Orthodoxy,” \textit{Westminster Theological Journal} 61 (1999) 53-71.}

Of course, the concern for Owen with Baxter’s approach was multifaceted, but perhaps the most frequently and quickly stated concern was that this kind of confessional simplicity left a spot for Socinians and Roman Catholics at the table.\footnote{Owen is worth quoting at length on this point: “[Such is] the vanity of all attempts to reconcile the differing parties among Christians by a confession of faith, composed in such general words ... [or to] be composed wholly out of the Scriptures and of expressions therein used; for it is not an agreement in words and the outward sound of them, but the belief and profession of the same truths or things, that is alone to be valued ... An agreement in \textit{words only} parrots may learn ... But for men to declare their assent unto a certain form of words, and in the meantime in their minds and understandings expressly to judge and condemn the faith and apprehensions of one another about these very things, is a matter that no way tends to the union, peace, or edification of the church .... For instance, suppose a form of words expressing in general that Christ was a high priest ... [Such could be] subscribed by the Socinians and their adversaries .... [But] will this in the least further any agreement or unity between us ...?” (A \textit{Vindication of The Animadversions on “Fiat Lux”}, in \textit{Works}, 14:194-95).} This was not at all an option for Owen and the Dissenting Brethren. For them, unity was now being envisioned within a basic, essentially Reformed and evangelical identity, as the growing partnership among Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists in these years demonstrates.\footnote{See Lawrence’s argument for better appreciating the catholicity and unity pursued by Owen, Goodwin, and their brethren in these events: “Thomas Goodwin and the Puritan Project,” pp. 183-87.} A middle ground between Presbyterian uniformity and a Baxter-like non-confessional ecumenism was the
goal, and this meant a careful confession of orthodoxy owned by an uncoercive and godly state.

Eventually, for reasons not entirely clear, Parliament viewed The New Confession as unusable and set it aside.\(^{53}\) Talk continued to surface in the House about the remaining need for agreement on identifying heresies and fundamentals, but nothing materialized.

**D. The Humble Petition and Advice (1657)**

The second Cromwellian constitution to be ratified was The Humble Petition and Advice (1657). Its articles on religion carry a tone of greater political conservativism, reflective of the still-growing concern about multiplying heresies and more radical religious practices of the day. Indeed, it is difficult not to think of the recent James Nayler affair\(^{54}\) when reading Article 10 of the Petition: “... we earnestly desire that such as do openly revile [the ministry] or their assemblies, or disturb them in the worship or service of God, ... or breach of the peace, may be punished according to law.” Nayler had recently attempted to re-enact Christ’s triumphal entry by riding into Bristol on a donkey. He was charged with public blasphemy, but the final prosecution of Nayler proved difficult under the outdated Blasphemy Act.\(^{55}\) Some had argued that the Instrument of Government was not stringent or clear enough to warrant a finding of his guilt.\(^{56}\) Thus,

---

\(^{53}\) Blaire Worden has suggested that it was actually because The New Confession did not delimit heresy carefully enough. See “Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate,” p. 219.


\(^{55}\) See Journal of the House of Commons, 6:453-54.

\(^{56}\) Diary of Thomas Burton, Esq. 1:60-61. Exemplary of the diversity of the views on liberty: Cromwell, conversely, believed that it was Nayler’s suffering that was proof of the Instrument’s inadequacy. See Wilber Cortez Abbott and Catherine Crance, eds., Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1945), 4:417.
the *Humble Petition* asked, “where the laws are defective, that your Highness will give consent” that such laws be made. In other words, the Petition implied, new and multiplying heresies require ongoing consideration of laws to adequately and quickly confront such heresies.

Like its predecessor, this new constitution also included a call for a new public confession, and here again, no one would be permitted to “revile or reproach the Confession.” Yet, liberty and tolerance were more closely tied to those of the “true Protestant Christian religion” in The *Humble Petition*. Like the *Instrument of Government*, it specified that this liberty not extend to “Popery or Prelacy,” to licentiousness, or to the propagation of “horrible blasphemies.” However, in the *Humble Petition* there was now a distinctly Trinitarian description of this religion: it is “faith in God the Father, … Jesus Christ His eternal Son, the true God, … the Holy Spirit, God co-equal with the Father and the Son, one God blessed for ever ....” Such Trinitarian Protestant Christians will “not be compelled” to hold to the “doctrine, worship or discipline, [to] the public profession” of the state — i.e., not be compelled to hold to doctrines beyond Trinitarian Protestantism.

It would seem then that the *Humble Petition* envisioned a public confession (yet to be written) beyond mere Fundamental/Trinitarian articles. Yet, for those Trinitarian Christians who hold to a beliefs outside the State’s, “endeavours shall be used to convince” with sound doctrine. While this sentiment and language was used in previous constitutions, in this context it is exemplified in regards to James Nayler. During his trial, members of the House suggested that Owen, Caryl, and Nye be sent to try to convince Nayler of his error and to “see if some good may be wrought upon him” to turn to the truth.57 Clearly these were not abstract, theoretical, or strictly theological matters.

The confession called for in the *Humble Petition* would likewise form an explicit litmus test for ministerial examination. What is noteworthy here is the repeated distinction between doctrine and practice in the Petition. For example, ministers who

---

57 See *Diary of Thomas Burton, Esq.* 1:79-80.
“agree with the public profession,” and yet differ from the state “in matters of worship and discipline,” shall still be “capable of receiving the public maintenance” for the ministry and protected in their way of polity and worship. In other words, should the national church adopt an official way of church government and worship (as it did following the Westminster Assembly), the public ministry would not be limited to those willing to conform to it (as was not the case following Westminster). This distinction between doctrinal subscription and practical ecclesiology was not new in the Reformed tradition, but it was new to England’s ecclesiastical tradition—at least formally and officially speaking. It was an argument voiced by the Dissenting Brethren during the ecclesiastical debates of Westminster Assembly. And as we shall see in what follows it was also a methodology that Owen and his brethren employed in their most significant and elaborate confessional project, the Savoy Assembly (1658).

Analysis of the Savoy Assembly and its surrounding documents will occupy the majority of the remainder of this chapter. Reasons for this heightened attention will be made clear along the way, as will its connection to the previous confessional formulations of the 1650s.

III. The Savoy Assembly (1658)

Perhaps because of the lack of its immediate success, or because of its similarities to the WCF, the SDF is today a very neglected historical document. Without a thorough examination

58 Throughout this chapter repeated reference will be made to this distinction between doctrinal belief and ecclesiastical practice. It should be noted that neither in the Humble Petition nor Owen’s later use of the distinction necessarily suggests that matters of ecclesiastical practice are not fundamentally doctrinal in nature. Indeed they are. The distinction between doctrine and practice was simply their chosen language to distinguish between two different kinds of doctrines: those of beliefs and others of (belief-rooted) practice. It was a shorthand (even if not terribly precise) way of distinguishing between points of unity and diversity, especially among the Reformed (Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregationalists, and Baptists).

of the secondary literature on this point, it suffices to simply note that for a half-century the most thorough analysis of the Savoy Assembly was the fifty-page introduction provided by A.G. Matthews. 60 While Matthews’ study has been significant and influential, his characterization of the Assembly as a rather gloomy, defensive, even separatist body of frustrated Republicans needs reconsideration.61 Goodwin, Nye, Bridge, Greenhill, Caryl, and Owen had been heavily involved in the previous attempts at an ecumenical Cromwellian church settlement, and these six likewise comprised the inner committee of the Congregationalists’ Savoy Assembly. With another 200 delegates participating as well, this was no small affair; in fact, it was England’s largest Protestant confessional assembly to date – larger than the magisterial Westminster Assembly.

In the last half-century, the question of whether there is something more official, more politically proactive about the Savoy’s confessional work has occasionally been raised. Toon, for instance, entertained the possibility of a connection between the Savoy and the recent *Humble Petition*, writing:

Did the Congregationalists who met at the Savoy Palace ... originally intend to produce a confession of faith which could have served as the basis for the confession required by the *Humble Petition*? An affirmative answer is probably the right one but no evidence is available to prove it ....62

---


61 For example, Matthews’ understanding of Oliver Cromwell’s assessment of the Savoy Assembly may more accurately summarize his own: that it was “an inopportune manifestation of sectarianism ....” See Matthews, ed., *The Savoy Declaration*, p. 16 (also pp. 28-29, 42-43, passim).

62 Toon, *God’s Statesman*, p. 101. Similar suggestions are also briefly entertained in Wallace, “The Life and Thought of John Owen to 1660,” pp. 300-03; Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, pp. 199-201. The matter is addressed at greater length in
Reformed and Reforming

Toon concluded that these are “unanswerable questions.”\textsuperscript{63} And, unfortunately, his analysis just a few pages later seems to revert to Matthews’ standard assessment of the assemblymen as rather fearful and retreating Independents.\textsuperscript{64} But Lawrence also hypothesized that the confession called for in the \textit{Humble Petition} “is probably the key to understanding the decision by Goodwin, Owen and other leading Independents to organise the Savoy Conference.”\textsuperscript{65} Austin Woolrych similarly suggested that at “much the same time [as the Savoy Assembly] the Commons were debating in grand committee the adoption of a ‘public profession’ of the nation’s faith, and ordered that it should consist of the doctrinal articles of the Westminster Confession .... [N]o minister was to receive the public maintenance unless he subscribed to it.”\textsuperscript{66} Unfortunately, Woolrych provides no references for this allusion to the SDF.\textsuperscript{67} He nevertheless concludes, “As in Oliver’s time, parliament wanted a more strictly defined national church and a narrower range of tolerance outside of it ....”\textsuperscript{68} All of this would seem to follow the confessional trajectory of what has been shown thus far in this chapter. Yet, more explicit evidence is needed to more solidly connect the Savoy Assembly to the confessional intentions of the \textit{Humble Petition}.

Unfortunately, unlike the Westminster Assembly – with its remarkable amount of extant minutes, journals, sermons, and related correspondence\textsuperscript{69} – there is very little information about

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item Toon, \textit{God’s Statesman}, p. 101. Similarly, see Bremer, \textit{Congregational Communion}, p. 201.
\item See Toon, \textit{God’s Statesman}, p. 107.
\item Lawrence, “Thomas Goodwin and the Puritan Project,” p. 183 (see also pp. 184-87).
\item Woolrych, \textit{Britain in Revolution}, p. 717.
\item Woolrych may have in mind an account in \textit{The Diary of Thomas Burton, Esq.}, January 2, 1658, 2:330-36.
\item Woolrych, \textit{Britain in Revolution}, p. 717.
\item Of course, more material is increasingly coming to light, thanks to the ongoing work of The Westminster Assembly Project (www.westminsterassembly.org) and the publication of Van Dixhoorn, ed., \textit{The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster}
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
the actual meetings at the Savoy. No journals or minutes were kept or seemed to survive. The document closest to a journal or log of minutes is the lengthy Preface (29 pages in the original), most likely penned by Owen at the close of their conference.\textsuperscript{70} If it is true that the work at Savoy is still an under-analyzed moment in the history and theology of the 1650s, then the Savoy Preface is something like a ghost of the past — something unseen, ignored, and/or even snickered at.\textsuperscript{71} However, as we shall see in what follows, the Savoy Preface provides many insights into its complex politico-ecclesiastical context, its framers’ confessional purposes, and (assuming it was authored primarily by him) Owen’s theology and theologizing. In other words, the Preface provides previously overlooked insight into the question of the parochial or political nature of the Savoy Assembly,\textsuperscript{72} while also shedding further light on Owen’s approach to confessions and confessionalization;

---

\textsuperscript{70} Though there is no hard evidence that Owen was the author of the Preface, this seems to have been assumed from the very beginning and on to the present day. See William Stephen, ed., \textit{Register of the Consultations of the Ministers of Edinburgh and Some Other Brethren of the Ministry}, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Scottish Historical Society, 1921-30), 2:153; Matthews, \textit{The Savoy Declaration}, p. 33; Lawrence, “Thomas Goodwin and the Puritan Project,” p. 186; Woolrych, \textit{Britain in Revolution}, p. 717. On the one hand, its exact authorship makes little difference: if Owen did not author it alone, he undoubtedly agreed with everything in it. On the other hand, anyone very familiar with Owen’s unique prose will find the Preface to have a remarkably Owenian feel. I will assume for the purposes of this chapter that he was its primary author.

\textsuperscript{71} Walker’s assessment betrays his neglect: “a long, dreary Preface, alleged to have been written by John Owen ... [but] it is certainly one of the weakest productions that ever came from his pen.” See Walker, ed., \textit{The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism}, p. 352. Similarly for Matthews: “Owen’s Preface is deplorably deficient in factual detail” and is simply “prolix sermonizing” (Matthews, ed., \textit{The Savoy Declaration}, p. 11).

\textsuperscript{72} In seeking to answer the question of the possible national/political intentions of the Assembly, Powell (“The Last Confession”) focused on the Savoy’s \textit{Declaration of Faith}, while Halcomb (“Congregational Religious Practice”) focused on its \textit{Declaration of Order}. Neither Powell, Halcomb, nor Cooper (\textit{John Owen, Richard Baxter}), give the Preface thorough attention.
thereby revealing important detail on his view of the kingdom of God as a national entity.73

A. Beginning with Westminster

The Congregationalists’ decision to form their confession by revising the WCF is a fascinating and multi-faceted one. Among other reasons, doing so provided the Congregationalists with the opportunity to demonstrate their theological proximity to their Presbyterian brethren. The Preface states, as for the “substance of [the WCF], we fully assent, as do our Brethren of New England, and the churches of Scotland” (xx). The Savoyans did, of course, make revisions to the WCF for their SDF — some very minor and some whole chapter additions or excisions.74 This is partially explained in the Preface: (1) some were made to address better “some erroneous opinions” which were then “more broadly and boldly” being asserted; (2) some were simply “in method;” and (3) others were intended as “clearer explanations” (xxi). Similarly, in a speech which presented the Savoy documents to the newly appointed Lord Protector, Thomas Goodwin explained that their intentions were to show their harmony with the most orthodox allies at home and abroad, to set forth their [Congregationalist] principles and practices, and to demonstrate where they differed from their Presbyterian brethren.75

Space will not permit a thorough theological comparison of the WCF and SDF here, but it must be noted that the changes made to the WCF in the SDF are not merely those which touch upon church polity. In addition to the obvious changes on the church or in the Savoy’s separate document on Church Order,

73 References to the Savoy’s Preface below will follow the pagination of its original publication, A Declaration of the Faith and Order Owned and Practised in the Congregational Churches (1658). Unfortunately, these page numbers are not provided in Matthews’ edited republication of the Savoy’s work; however, original pagination is provided within the body of the text in Walker, ed., The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, pp. 354-67.

74 The significant changes to the WCF are listed and explained in the Preface, pp. xxi-xxiii.

75 The speech was printed in Mercurius Politicus 438 (1658), p. 924.
there are fairly significant doctrinal differences on repentance, assurance, gospel/justification, the covenants, eschatology, etc. Some of the Savoy’s alterations may be considered merely an elaboration or a sophistication of the WCF. But others may represent common deeper theological and hermeneutical differences between Presbyterians and Congregationalists in those days.

It would seem, therefore, that the Savoyans’ use of the WCF and changes to the WCF worked as a double-edged sword. The vast majority of doctrinal content — the “substance,” as the Preface says — was shared between the two confessions, and the Savoyans made changes as sparingly as possible. This demonstrated the Congregationalists’ doctrinal proximity to, even unity with, their Presbyterian countrymen. In that sense, it was a unifying, ecumenical project. And yet, the Savoy Assembly was its “own man,” so to speak. They were not shy about making revisions to that “great confession,” which Goodwin called the “latest and best.” In fact, they had hoped that their new confession would come to “rank amongst” the “many good and memorable things of this age;” or, at least, “all set together,” that many confessions would “cast a clear gleam and manifestation of God’s power and presence ....” (vi).

---


77 The theological differences of the WCF and SDF are discussed in: Peter Toon, “The Westminster and Savoy Confessions: A Brief Comparison” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 15 (1972) 153-60; David Walker, “Thomas Goodwin and the Debate on Church Government” Journal of Ecclesiastical History 34 (1983) 85-99. A fresh analysis of the issue — especially whether changes made to WCF by the Savoyans indicate different general theological leanings between the two groups (or two decades) and whether these have any relationship to ecclesiology — is long overdue.

78 Mercurius Politicus 438 (1658), p. 924.

79 Their high hopes for the confession can also be seen simply in the aggressive printing and selling of it over the next year. For specifics, see Matthews, ed., The Savoy Declaration, pp. 40-41.
Further, its use of the WCF as its starting point is not without some political significance. In his explanation for their use of the WCF, the Savoy’s Preface provides a small but curious reminder that that confession had been “approved and passed by both Houses of Parliaments” (xx). The reason for this obvious statement is not immediately clear, but perhaps it suggests that the Savoyans went back to the WCF, at least in part, because it was the last fully ratified national confession. Despite the flurry of creedral attempts in the 1650s, none had actually been accepted as the nation’s public profession. This is a point to which we shall return further in the chapter.

B. Clarifying Congregationalism

The previous confessional attempts by Owen and the Dissenting Brethren in the 1650s had been purposefully ecumenical and mostly fundamental in nature (The New Confession being slightly more than fundamental). Yet because these confessional committees were predominantly made up of and led by Congregationalists, it seems that this might have led to them gaining a reputation for only being concerned with fundamentals. The Preface confronts that misconception. They acknowledge, “forbearance and mutual indulgence ... in all matters extrafundamental” has been “our constant principle;” but this was not out of an indifference to falsehood or carelessness about “any truths but fundamental” (ix). In their previous confessions, they had “not cut out” such a “wide cloak” for themselves, but for others (ix). The theological detail and strict orthodoxy of the SDF was proof; therein they were finally professing “the whole and every particle of that Faith delivered to the Saints” (ix), “all the superstructures as well as fundamentals” (viii). In other words, they certainly had nothing to hide.

The Preface also addressed another popular misconception of the Congregationalists: that its polity had no hope of providing any kind of theological stability for the nation, or, for that matter, even between churches. The critics of Congregationalism (Roman, Episcopal, and Presbyterian) contended that without any kind of formal leadership structure above local churches, such as synods or bishops, eventually there would be as many different theologies
as churches. Theological chaos was thought to be inevitable for the Congregational model. Indeed, this rumor was acknowledged in Goodwin’s speech to Richard about the assembly’s intentions: they were seeking to “clear” themselves “of that scandal” that “Independentism (as they call it) is the sink of all heresies and schisms.”

The Preface, on the one hand, acknowledges that “our churches” have at times functioned like “so many ships” sailing “alone in the vast ocean” (xiii). The meeting at Savoy not only clarified that, but brought a new resolve to improve communication between churches and face-time between pastors. On the other hand, the Preface refuses to accept the critique that Congregationalism is by nature insular and dangerous. The proof was in the confession itself – i.e., its theological detail, precision, and high-orthodoxy.

Here, Owen took some length to paint a picture of the unusual peace and unity which, in his estimation, were necessary for a lengthy confession to be agreed upon in short order. The documents were “framed and consented ... by the whole” assembly in just “eleven days” (xi), he writes. This “gives demonstration, not of our freeness onely, but of our readiness and preparedness unto so great a work” (xi). Conversely, Owen notes that “other assemblies” (no doubt another glance to the Westminster Assembly) have ordinarily “taken up long and great debates,” and, through a variety of matters debated, often there was “fall out” (xi).

Rather empathetically, Owen acknowledges how rare and difficult theological agreement can be in such an assembly of divines. There is always “the mixture of ignorance, darkness and unbelief, carnal reason, preoccupation of judgment, interest of parties, wantonness of opinion, proud adhering to our own persuasions, and perverse ... averseness to agree with others ... .” (xi). These “cloud our judgments, and ... cause our eyes to see double, and sometimes prevail” (xii). The contrast of the Savoy meetings was telling, according to Owen: “It is therefore to be looked at as a great and special work of the holy Ghost, that so

80 Mercurius Politicus 438 (1658), p. 924.
numerous a company of Ministers ... should so readily, speedily, and jointly give up themselves unto such a whole body of truth ...” (xii). The Savoy men insist that their unity and theological orthodoxy is, in fact, comparable to “the best and more pure Reformed Churches in their best of times” (x).

Owen concludes, then, that after “many years,” God “hath not only kept” the Congregational churches “in that common unity of the faith ... but also in the same truths, both small and great” (x). In other words, the unity enjoyed at their Assembly was evidence that the theological orthodoxy of their churches did not need to be maintained by synods or bishops — it had been maintained by God.

This, then, may seem to indicate that the SDF functioned as a strictly Congregationalist document with a predominantly defensive tone. It was indeed an undeniably Congregationalist assembly; that much is clear from the title of their documents, the attendees, and also from the Preface’s frequent use of “our churches.” But the matter is more complex than those bare facts.

C. Separating Declaration of Faith and Church Order

The Savoy Assembly’s decision to keep its Declaration of Faith separate from its Church Order seems to be significant, as the Preface once again makes reference to Parliament on this point:

81 A year before Owen boldly defended the Congregational churches: “Do we live in strife and variance? Do we not bear with each other? Do we not worship God without disputes and divisions? Have we differences and contentions in our assemblies? Do we break any bond of union wherein we are bound by the express institutions of Jesus Christ? If we have, let the righteous reprove us; we will own our guilt, confess we have been carnal, and endeavour reformation” (Works, 13:117).

82 Of course, for some critics, there was likely another explanation for the Savoy’s unanimity and efficiency: Owen’s heavy-handed leadership. See Baxter, Reliquiae Baxterianae, p. 104; Matthews, ed., The Savoy Declaration, p. 35; Daniel Neale, History of the Puritans, 3 vols. (London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1837), 2:178. Elsewhere, the Preface acknowledges that within some of England’s Congregationalist church there have, at times, been “sad miscarriages, divisions, breaches falling off from holy Ordinances,” but it is hoped that the work at Savoy would nevertheless serve to “stop others mouthes” (xv).
To this course we are led by the Example of the Honorable Houses of Parliament, observing what was established, and what was omitted by them in that Confession the Assembly presented to them. We thought it not convenient to have matters of Discipline and Church-Government put into a Confession of Faith ... (xxi).

This must be alluding to the distinction between doctrinal belief and ecclesiastical practice in the Humble Petition and Advice. The Savoyans “observed what had been established” in the Petition, and observed that this “was omitted ... in that confession” (the WCF). Then they sought to provide what was missing between the two in the Savoy documents.

The Savoy’s Declaration of Church Order itself seems to be, at points, more of an official national proposal than a separatist’s guide to doing church. The clearest indication of this is that it assumes the continuation of public maintenance. Those “engaged in the work of Publique Preaching, and enjoy the Publique Maintenance” are given explanation about their essential duties: the sacraments, preaching, and “enquiring after ... and impressing upon [those in their care] (whether young or old)” Also, a distinction is made between pastors of the public ministry and other (lay) preachers; of course, the latter are not discouraged from preaching but encouraged to use their gifts.

On the other hand, sounding an essentially-Congregationalist note, the appointment to a pastoral calling is determined by the elders of that “Church itself.” There is no mention of a national system of ministerial approbation here. Such would have been too complex and contested to prove successful. Also, particular churches, especially those in “communion together,” may meet in a “Synod or Council, to consider and give their advice ... about a matter of difference,” and the intra-church advice would be “reported to all the churches.” Yet still, “these synods are not

---

83 Savoy Declaration of ... Order, Article 14.
84 Savoy Declaration of ... Order, Article 14.
85 Savoy Declaration of ... Order, Article 13.
86 Savoy Declaration of ... Order, Articles 11-12.
entrusted with any Church-Power ... or Jurisdiction over the churches ....”

It is certainly not explicitly stated in the Savoy’s Church Order that their intention was to fulfill the missing confessional pieces of the Humble Petition. But it is not at all a far stretch to connect the two documents, as others have done, especially in light of the Preface’s explicit words about why the Declaration of Faith was distinguished from the Church Order: they were following Parliament’s course.”

It would seem, then, that the Savoyans were envisioning the SDF to serve as a confessional boundary for ministerial approbation, while allowing liberty on matters of ecclesiastical structure and practice, just as the Humble Petition articulated. Such an interpretation of Savoy’s intentions would also seem to answer the critique of some historians that the Church Order of Savoy is a very weak Congregationalism.

Though the documents were clearly birthed by Congregationalists, their intentions seem broader, and perhaps that is what lies behind their lack of specificity for church order. It was a move in accommodation towards the unification of the kingdom.

Yet, much more still can be said regarding Savoy’s possible connections to the state.

D. Liberty, the Magistrate, and Confession

In 1659 Owen wrote a small tract, Unto the Questions Sent to me Last Night, which seems to be an explanation of the Congregationalists’ recent intentions with the Savoy meetings. It deals with three questions: (1) Should the magistrate have power

---

87 Savoy Declaration of ... Order, Articles 26-27.
88 See, for example, Coffey, “John Owen and the Puritan Toleration Controversy,” and Powell, “The Last Confession.” The Savoyans were also finally responding to the call of their Presbyterian brethren at the Westminster Assembly to “bring in a platform of government concerning particular congregations.” See John de Witt, Jus Divinum: The Westminster Assembly and the Divine Right of Church Government (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1969), pp. 150-61.
89 For example, Walker, Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, p. 351.
90 Published in the Works as Two Questions Concerning the Power of the Supreme Magistrate Etc. (1659), in Works, 13:508-16.
in matters of religion? Owen answers this in the affirmative, and argues the case from ten theses.\textsuperscript{91} (2) Should the magistrate “compel” professed Christians “to subscribe to that confession of faith and attend to that way of worship ...?” Owen first laments that on this issue most men “have run into extremes” on “account of their own interest or ... party.” Nevertheless, he answers the question “negatively.” This kind of exerted authority, he states, “would immediately affect the conscience, and set up itself in direct opposition to the light of God ....”\textsuperscript{92} (3) Should the present system of ministerial maintenance and tithes be taken away? Here, Owen acknowledges that an “alteration” of the methods of payment could be improved, but to “take away the public maintenance” altogether would be a “contempt of the care and faithfulness of God towards his church.”\textsuperscript{93} From this tract it is clear that, regardless of how much political influence Owen may have lost by 1659, his views of the magistrate, liberty, and the public ministry remained the same. They were the same politico-ecclesiastical principles of the \textit{Humble Proposals}, the \textit{Humble Petition}, and the documents conceived at Savoy.

It should not be surprising, then, that two of the more substantial changes to the WCF in the SDF were on the Liberty of Conscience and the Civil Magistrate. The WCF draws a much stricter line on dissent. The fourth clause of Chapter 20, which was removed for the SDF, reads: “they who upon pretence of Christian liberty shall oppose” any “civil or ecclesiastical” authority, “whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation ..., as either ... publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the ... peace and ... may lawfully be called to account.” Conversely, Chapter 24 of the SDF, on the Civil Magistrate, is completely rewritten and is worth quoting in full:

> Although the magistrate is bound to encourage, promote, and protect the professors and profession of the gospel, and to manage and order civil administrations in a due subserviency to the interest


\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Two Questions}, in \textit{Works}, 13:514.

\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Two Questions}, in \textit{Works}, 13:515-16.
of Christ in the world, and to that end to take care that men of corrupt minds and conversations do not licentiously publish and divulge blasphemy and errors, in their own nature subverting the faith and inevitably destroying the souls of them that receive them: yet in such differences about the doctrines of the gospel, or ways of the worship of God, as may befall men exercising a good conscience, manifesting it in their conversation, and holding the foundation, not disturbing others in their ways or worship that differ from them; there is no warrant for the magistrate under the gospel to abridge them of their liberty.\textsuperscript{94}

This aptly summarizes the view that has been shown to be propagated by Owen and his brethren throughout the 1650s: the magistrate was to promote the profession of godliness, protect the nation from heresy and blasphemy, and provide liberty for the differences of belief and practice within the Protestant Christian faith.

This view of the magistrate’s role in the nation’s religion can also be seen by the magistrate’s assent or even encouragement of the Savoy Assembly. As other have recently noted, it was Henry Scobell (Clerk to Oliver’s Council of State) who sent out the invitations for the meeting at the Savoy Palace (where he was master). Thus, Scobell was almost certainly operating in an official capacity in handling the communication for the Savoy Assembly.\textsuperscript{95}

All this adds dimension to why Thomas Goodwin not only formally presented the final product to the new Lord Protector Richard Cromwell, but also made sure to state that “the meeting at Savoy ... was made known to, and approved of by your Royal Father.”\textsuperscript{96} Further, as Patrick Little and David Smith have pointed out, there is strong evidence that Presbyterians at the time

\textsuperscript{94} In light of Chapter 24 of the \textit{SDF}, Goodwin’s words to Richard at the presentation of the Savoy’s work are significant: “And now we present Your Highness what we have done, and commit to your trust the Common faith once delivered to the Saints ..., committed to the trust of some in the Nations behalf .... [We] commit it to your trust as our Chief Magistrate, to countenance and propagate.” Mercurius Politicus 438 (1658), pp. 924-25.


\textsuperscript{96} Mercurius Politicus 438 (1658), p. 924.

However disenfranchised the Congregationalists are thought to have been by the late 1650s, it is a serious mistake to think that their Congregationalist identity was inherently tied to Republicanism or the separation of church and state. Such historiography is merely reading later developments of Congregationalism and/or political liberty back into Owen and his kind. Their view of the magistrate continued to be articulated by Owen and others during 1658-59, and in fact, well after the Restoration. Even in their nonconformity they had not abandoned their ideal of and hope for a godly church state.

In addition to Owen’s tract and Chapter 24 of the SDF, it is also necessary to see how the issue of liberty is discussed in Savoy’s Preface. Like the note of liberty struck all along, the SDF was “in no way to be made use of as an imposition upon” (iv). But, according to the Savoyans, the very nature of “confession” demands that it be free, not coerced or enforced. When “force or constraint” are used to demand confessional subscription, the confessions themselves “degenerate from the name and nature of Confessions,” turning from “being Confessions of Faith, into exactions and impositions of faith” (iv). For Owen and his Savoy brethren, this has significant connection to the freeness and sovereignty of the Spirit’s work. He will not “be used by any humane arm, to whip men into belief”; he “does not drive, but gently leads into truth” (v) — and is “free” as to “when, and how far, and in whom to work” (vi). Confessions, therefore, must have “that sparkle of freeness shone” on them (v).

---


99 This interpretation of Owen’s political views is demonstrated convincingly by Williams, “God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen,” *passim.*
In the Preface liberty is couched in a pilgrimage orientation to the Christian life, hinting at that scholastic category of theology viatorum (a theology of pilgrims, or a theology which is in via). The exact language of viatorum is not used in the Preface, but the concept was often enjoyed by Owen in other writings and is hinted at in the Savoy Preface. According to Francis Junius, the viatorum category means that the theology of Christians before heaven is ectypal; it is “mixed with weakness and imperfection.” As has already been shown, Owen described many of the “fetters” which normally divide or impede confessional assemblies. The Preface acknowledges the inevitability of theological error. It even ends on this very theme — what may be termed a humble self-suspicion: “Our prayer is” that “where we are otherwise minded, God would reveal it to us in his due time” (xxix). True confession is always and only “according to [the] light” obtained by those confessing (ix). Because each has not been given the same light, theological disagreements are inevitable among fellow pilgrims. The differences between “Presbyterians and Independents,” therefore, are “differences between fellow-servants, ... neither having authority ... to impose their opinions [on] the other” (xxix).

While the Congregationalists at Savoy were not at all shy about their own beliefs — even supposing they had made

---

100 For example: Theologoumena Pantodapa (1661), in Works, 17:17-39.
102 See Preface, SDF, p. xi.
103 This language of different degrees of light is also used extensively in the Roman Catholic polemic, Vindication of The Animadversions: e.g., Works, 14:314. In this work Owen offers a fascinating retort to the Roman Catholic accusation of divisions within Protestantism: he embraces it. He acknowledges, “I think it is prejudice, carnal interest, love of power, and present enjoyments, with other secular advantages; joined with pride, self-will, and contempt of others, that keep professors of Christianity from improving this consideration [of theological uniformity]” (Vindication of The Animadversions, in Works, 14:316). Owen sees the Roman Catholic vision for theological uniformity, on the other hand, as both (to use a contemporary phrase) an over-realized eschatology and inevitably leading to the use of the sword (Vindication of The Animadversions, in Works, 14:318).
theological clarifications and improvements to the WCF – and while they did not see the differences of church structure or worship as unimportant, the Savoy Assemblymen acknowledged the fetters that permeate all ectypal theology. This is no small part of their insistence that “amongst all Christian States and Churches, there ought to be ... forbearance and mutual indulgence unto Saints of all persuasions, ... in all other matters extrafundamental, whether of Faith or Order” (viii-ix). Contextualizing the issues of liberty and confessionalization in this way seems to provide a rather genteel approach to the in-house theological differences with their Presbyterian brethren, and also provide a theologically robust foundation for their broader understanding of religious liberty.

E. A Parliamentary Precedent for Ecclesiastical Liberty

Digging deeper into the Savoy’s Preface, there are several other seemingly obscure contextual-political references that still deserve exploration. Indeed, the last six pages of it (almost one-fourth of the total Preface) weave together multiple rather obscure references to Parliament, committees, correspondence, and legislation. As we shall see, each is part of an arsenal in the Assemblymen’s plea for continued liberty in matters of ecclesiastical practice. Identifying the context, meaning, and

---

104 See Preface, SDF, p. xxiii.

105 The Preface further the argument regarding the place of repentance for doctrinal error: “[regarding] our brethren of differing opinions,” in those “errors as do and may stand with communion with Christ, ... they should not repent of them, as not being convinced of them to the end of their days” (ix). In other words, where men are not convinced of their errors, in matters beyond the gospel, they should not repent, but should “enjoy all spiritual privileges according to their light” (ix). In one analysis, of course, this is just stating the obvious, for they cannot repent of that which they do not think is wrong. But, on the other hand, it seems to be rather bold to describe religious liberty in terms of not calling people to repentance for their errors. Perhaps the language intends to carry some shock value.

106 Preface, SDF, pp. xxiv-xxix.
purpose of these ambiguous references is not easy, but it is a key to understand the broader intentions of the Savoy Assembly.\textsuperscript{107}

The first such reference notes that when “our Governors” called that “Assembly of learned men” (the Westminster Assembly), it “was known that there were different opinions ... about forms of Church Government” (xxiv). Parliament not only made a choice to sit “persons of several persuasions” (xxiv) as members of the Assembly, but also heard the “dissenting ... report” of “their Judgments and Reasons” as “well and as freely as the major part” (xxv).\textsuperscript{108} This is obviously a simple reference to An Apologeticall Narration (January 1644). However, this is merely the starting point of the chronology being laid out.

The Preface further notes that because the House of Commons was itself composed of differences on church government, they ordered that

\begin{quote}
 a committee of Lords and Commons ... take into consideration the differences of the Assembly ... [on] Church-Government, and to endeavor a union if it be possible; and in case that cannot be done, to endeavor the finding out some way, how far tender consciences, who cannot in all things submit to the same Rule which shall be established, may be born with according to the Word, and as may stand with the publique peace. (xxv)
\end{quote}

Set in bold type in the original publication, this is an exact quote from the Commons Journal, September 13, 1644.\textsuperscript{109} The Savoy Preface continues by noting that the “Honorable Houses” had “several Ordinances of Parliament” and “much consultation” about this issue (xxv). No details are explicitly spelled out at this point of the Savoy Preface, but combing through the Commons Journal it is quickly obvious that there were many occasions of

\begin{flushright}
107 Matthews briefly comments on these political references in this section of the Preface (The Savoy Declaration, pp. 42-43), but not sufficiently or correctly in my opinion. To my knowledge, no other scholar has attempted to reconstruct the references and the argument being made in the Savoy.


\end{flushright}
“consultation” and several “ordinances” that were discussed in both Houses and within the “Committee for Accommodation in Matters of Difference Concerning Church Government.” However, no accommodation-ordinance was able to pass the Houses with the king’s consent.110

On April 7, 1646 the House of Lords received a letter from the Scots Commissioners. Having heard that their English counterparts had been considering liberty in the practice of church government, the Scots strongly pleaded for the “Uniformity of Church Government.”111 Less than a fortnight later, the Commons released a declaration about their intentions for the settling of church government. In it, the House assured all of their accord with the Solemn League and Covenant and their commitment to a godly and pure church settlement. But they simultaneously acknowledged that they have not “yet resolved, how a due Regard may be had” for “tender Consciences, which differ not in Fundamentals of Religion ....”112

About this time, several Congregationalist ministers in London were doing their best to persuade Parliament of their orthodoxy and support of the magistrate, while expressing their concern with the anticipated Presbyterian uniformity.113 This paper, clearly referred to in the Savoy’s Preface (xxvi), seems to have been received well. Nevertheless, it was not until eighteen months later that a committee was officially formed “to consider the Proposition touching Church Government.”114 Shortly after, the committee made its first proposal, and with the king’s consent,115 the House passed the following allowance for ecclesiastical liberty: “That no persons whatsoever shall be liable

110 Contra S.R. Gardiner, History of the Great Civil War, 4 vols. (London, 1888), 1:482. See Journal of the House of Commons, 3:725-26 for Charles’ indecision on the matter, and Journal of the House of Lords, 7:679, which shows that the Lords were still making plans to discuss the matter more than a year later.

111 Journal of the House of Lords, 8:256-58.


113 Certain Considerations and Cautions Agreed by the Ministers of London (June 1646).

114 October 6, 1647, Journal of the House of Commons, 5:327.

to any Question, or Penalty, for Nonconformity to the Form of Government ... [but] shall have Liberty to meet for the Service and Worship of God ... in any fit and convenient place.” It was qualified, of course, that this liberty was not to extend to heresy, to the “Popish Religion,” or to the “Use of the Book of Common Prayer in any place whatsoever.” But it was equally clear that there was to be liberty for “all Ministers of the Gospel” who “cannot conform to the present Government.” They shall be able “to preach ... in any Church or Chapel where they shall be desired ... and shall receive such Means and Maintenance as doth ... appertain.” In 1647, liberty for Congregationalists was passed into law.

However, this was far from settling the question of the national church government at that time. This ordinance allowing for nonconformity to the state system was ratified before a new system was officially established. All signs were clearly pointing to a Presbyterian national church in 1647. This was, of course, the majority view of the Westminster Assembly. King Charles had already agreed to the “Presbyterial government” of “the Assembly of Divines at Westminster.” But in early-1648 both Houses were continually delaying their discussions about the settling of church government. Indeed, both House journals frequently record that the matter of church government will be discussed “tomorrow” or “next Tuesday” – which practically never occurred. Finally, in May, a formal proposal was put forth for the settling of a Presbyterian national church. In August 1648, Parliament adopted An Ordinance for the Form of Church Government. This

---

116 October 14, 1647, Journal of the House of Commons, 5:332-33. This strong language against the Book of Common Prayer is almost certainly a reaction to Ireton’s proposal which appeared just before and allowed for its use. See “The Heads of Proposals Offered by the Army,” in Constitutional Documents, p. 321.


118 See the king’s third response to the propositions presented at Newcastle: May 12, 1647, Journal of the House of Lords, 9:193.

119 See, for example: Journal of the House of Commons, 5:636.

120 Journal of the House of Commons, 5:548-49.

new ecclesiastical ordinance announced that all churches would “be brought under the Government” of local, provincial, and national assemblies or presbyteries.

The Savoy Preface refers to this legislative act as well, recounting that Parliament “settled Rules for Church-Government, and such Ecclesiastical Order as they judged would best joynt with the Laws and Government ... , requiring the practise hereof throughout the Nation” (xxv-xxvi). Yet Owen also quickly notes, “these Rules were not imposed by them under any penalty or rigorous enforcement” (xxvi). By this, the Savoyans seem to intend more than just an observation that “Presbyterian uniformity” had gone unenforced in the late 1640s. Their interpretation of all these historical references is actually stated earlier in the Preface: “it is evident, the Parliament proposed not to establish the Rule of Church-Government with such rigor, as might not permit and bear with a practise different from what they had established ....” (xxv).

It seems, then, that the Assemblymen were suggesting that the 1648 ordinance enacting Presbyterian government was never meant to nullify the 1647 ordinance allowing liberty for tender consciences. In fact, the ordinance allowing for ecclesiastical liberty actually assumed that a Presbyterian national church would follow.122 The two ordinances may have been in inherent tension with each other, but it was not completely clear that the earlier ordinance on liberty had been repealed. In point of fact, it was not explicitly annulled. The most that can be said is that the ordinance instituting the Presbyterian system implied an undoing of the previous ordinance of ecclesiastical liberty.123

I am not in a position to judge how correct or sophisticated the political argument of the Savoy Preface might have been. But it does seem that, in these seemingly obscure references to

---

122 Van Dixhoorn notes that the Westminster divines had submitted to Parliament a draft of the directory for church government as early as the summer of 1645 (“Reforming the Reformation,” p. 346).

123 Later, in years of post-Restoration nonconformity, Owen goes further: “the presbyterian government was never here established; and each party took liberty to reform themselves acceding to their principles” (The True Nature of a Gospel Church and its Government [1689], in Works 15:433).
Parliament and legislation, they were attempting something more than to simply bolster their party’s reputation and relevance in the nonconformity of the previous decade. They were making a subtle-yet-persistent case for the past legality of nonconformity alongside a Presbyterian state church.\footnote{Contra Matthews, ed., The Savoy Declaration, who interpreted the political/legislative references in the Savoy Preface as Owen’s attempt to ignore the legitimacy of the Cromwellian church regime (p. 42) and encourage the “one legitimate government” of “the Long Parliament” (p. 44). Matthews concluded that Owen is merely “repeating a fiction from the doctrinaire stock-in-trade of his [Republican] party;” therefore, the Preface is to be understood as “a thinly veiled plea for the Restoration of the remnant of the Long Parliament” (pp. 42-43). As has been argued here, however, the Savoyans were making a legal case for ecclesiastical liberty at the end of the Preface, but not necessarily a political argument for a certain parliamentary or governmental structure. While Owen’s personal political views cannot be thoroughly examined here, I would argue that he was less concerned with the actual structure of the government, and more concerned to seek out the best possible good of the saints, the churches, and the gospel in the nation. This is summarized best when Owen writes, “the founding of Zion doth not consist in this or that form of the civil administration of human affairs, there being nothing promised nor designed concerning them, but that they be laid in an orderly subserviency to the common interest of the saints ....” See “God’s Work in Founding Zion,” (1656) in Works, 8:421.}

If it is true that the Preface attempts a political argument for the liberty of nonconformists in the late 1640s, it still raises the question of the need for that argument in the late 1650s. What would it matter if nonconformity had still been technically legal after the institution of Presbyterianism in 1648? Surely Owen and his brethren knew that all previous religious legislation had been annulled more than once since then.\footnote{See, for example: The Humble Petition and Advice, Article 11.} But perhaps their argument was simply meant to challenge an assumed historical precedent for Presbyterian uniformity in England. While Oliver Cromwell gave his permission for the Assembly at Savoy, he died a full month before the work was finished.\footnote{Mercurius Politicus 438 (1658), p. 924.} Richard, the new Lord Protector, had known Presbyterian sympathies and a stricter view of liberty than his father.\footnote{On Richard’s Presbyterian sympathies, see Little and Smith, Parliaments and Politics During the Cromwellian Protectorate, pp. 148-70.} The recently (re)established Parliament in 1658 was volatile, to say the least, but recent
research confirms that the House’s makeup was increasingly Presbyterian and generally more concerned for restrictions than liberties.\textsuperscript{128} So, from the vantage point of the Savoy Assembly, should Richard and/or the volatile Parliament attempt to return the nation to a rigidly uniform system of church government, perhaps there would be a better chance of maintaining the distinction between doctrinal subscription and ecclesiastical liberty, especially if it could be shown that its historic roots lay in a Presbyterian Parliament from 1647.

\textbf{F. Summarizing the Assembly’s Intentions}

As has been shown in this chapter, many of the political references in the Savoy documents seem to suggest its intentions as another constitutional/confessional proposal, one fulfilling the \textit{Humble Petition} and tied to the public maintenance and the magistrate. On the other hand, it must also be considered that the Savoy Assembly titled its documents as \textit{Congregationalist} descriptions; this is unique when compared with the previous Interregnum legislative-confessional attempts by the same men. It was stated in both Goodwin’s speech to Richard and Owen’s Preface that no small part of their purpose was to clear the reputation of the \textit{Congregational} churches. The occasional hints of a defensive posture suggest that perhaps the Congregationalists were once again becoming a misunderstood and/or marginalized party. Likewise, the last several pages of the Preface lay out a lengthy and rather complex argument for the continuation of ecclesiastical liberties. Of course, Owen and his brethren had been articulating their view of liberty throughout the 1650s, but it is curious that their plea for liberty at the end of the Preface is much more specific and personal than before: now they were expressing concern for the possible loss of liberty in \textit{their} (“our”) churches — i.e., Congregational churches.\textsuperscript{129} Indeed, the main point of the closing pages of the Preface is a concern for the


\textsuperscript{129} Preface, \textit{SDF}, pp. xxiii-xxix.
possibility of the nation returning to Presbyterian uniformity in the near future.\footnote{130}

Therefore, "the key to understanding the Savoyans’ relationship to the state — or, at least the key to understanding the complexity of the issue — is in the political turmoil, uncertainty, and even historical mystery of the last eighteen months of the Protectorate. In such uncertain times, the Savoy brethren were playing two hands of poker at the same time. John Morrill seems to suggest something similar in his short summary of the SDF: “It was hoped that Oliver Cromwell would act on it, but his death plunged the country back into political chaos.”\footnote{131} More convincingly, Tim Cooper has recently bolstered this interpretation of events via a rather obscure account from James Sharp. A month after the publication of the SDF, the Presbyterian Sharp wrote:

I find that those who pass under the notion of Presbyterians are still in jealousie [of] the Independent party who do stickle more now than ever to strengthen their faction and to get into the sadle. They have published a confession ... on designe upon sitting downe of the Parliament to prevent the imposing (as they say) of the [Westminster] Assemblie’s Confession, which they feared the Parliament might doe.\footnote{132}

\footnote{130}{However much the Savoy might carry Congregationalist elements and purposes, the analysis of W.K. Jordan can only attributed to his determined Whiggism: “Congregationalism began to stir restlessly in its association with radical sectarianism and to display its traditional conservatism on the question of religious liberty” resulting in “the Savoy Conference” (The Development of Religious Toleration in England, 4:435).}

\footnote{131}{John Morrill, “The Puritan Revolution,” in The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism, Coffey and Lim, eds., p. 82. For an excellent account of the complicated political uncertainty leading up to the Restoration, see Gary DeKrey, London and the Restoration, 1659-1683 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 3-66. Such can also be seen in a sermon Owen preached to Parliament roughly three months after the publication of the Savoy documents: “The Glory and Interest of Nations Professing the Gospel” (1659), in Works, 8:455-71.}

This account makes a strong case for the Savoyan’s proactive political intentions. It attests that the SDF was designed with hopes of it being set before Parliament. It also indicates that this was simultaneously an offensive and defensive move. The Congregationalists feared imposition — and, of course, not just imposition of Westminster’s doctrine, but its polity and prescribed worship. Completely aware of the political chaos in October 1658, the Assembly still hoped for a unification of “the godly” under the principles they articulated throughout the 1650s and now crystallized in the SDF; yet they also prepared for the possibility of new religious restrictions by demonstrating their common orthodoxy and by arguing for their continued ecclesiastical liberty. Unfortunately for them, by 1662 it was more than clear that neither hand of poker played out very well — neither for Congregationalists nor for (nonconforming) Presbyterians.

In sum, while Owen and his colleagues seem to have moved in a more theologically-restrictive outlook throughout the 1650s — from Fundamental Articles of the sixteen “Principles” (1652) to the more Calvinistic New Confession (1654) to the full Reformed confession of Savoy (1658) — they maintained their commitment to unite the godly, to “settle” England’s religion, to provide liberty for Christian worship, to promote orthodoxy and a national ministry, to restrict those who would impede against those goals, and to see the magistrate lead the kingdom in these matters.133

133 I am aware that Coffey, among others, has entertained whether Owen’s views on liberty showed signs of change, particularly on the punishment/executions of heretics (see “John Owen and the Puritan Toleration Controversy,” pp. 233, 239-41, 246-47). However, I would suggest that any differences on this point in Owen are those of emphases owing to the differing contexts: the mid-1640s (when Presbyterian uniformity was a threat to Owen’s kind) vs. the 1650s (when heresy was a greater concern, as was the need to settle a church under the magistrate). I cannot agree with Coffey’s conclusion that in the end Owen “clung to traditional ideas about the magistrate’s coercive power in matters of religion” (p. 248). I find that Owen never agreed with that term “coercive” in this context. This is a matter to which we shall return in the following chapter.
Reformed and Reforming

This brings to a close the consideration of the official intentions of the Savoy's work; however, there are a handful of remaining issues that can be gleaned from the Preface which more generally relate to the purpose of confessions and the nature of creed-making. Once again, perhaps because the Preface is a disinteresting (even disliked) document to some, its commentary on confessions and confessionalization has sadly been ignored.

G. Scripture, Confessions, and Confessing Anew

As has been shown throughout this chapter, in most of the previous Cromwellian settlement proposals, a national confession was intended to be “publically held forth” in hopes that dissenters might be “won” or “convinced” and not coerced. The SDF likewise was intended to be “publickly held forth,” as the Preface states (xiv). However, elsewhere the Preface adds an important distinction for the matter of convincing dissenters—a distinction between confessions and Scripture as the means of that “convincing.” The SDF itself aimed “not so much to instruct others, or convince gainsayers. These are the proper works of other institutions of Christ, and are to be done in the strength of express Scripture.” But a “Confession is an Ordinance of another nature” (xxiii). While the means of these institutes and their scriptural expressions are not clearly specified, perhaps this distinction alludes to the centrality of scriptural preaching for conversion and transformation. Nevertheless, what is clear is that the Savoy Preface makes delineation between “confessions” and “express Scriptures,” positing a clearer dependence on and preference for the latter. Its language, then, both stands within and goes slightly beyond the recent tradition of confessional purposes of the 1650s; it is a confession which is to be publically held forth, but Scripture itself must be the means of convincing naysayers.134

Owen speaks similarly in a later work, The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God (1678). The “accurate

---

134 See also the discussion on the relationship between Scripture and “articles of faith” in Vindication of the Animadversions, in Works, 14:314-16.
methods” of men, he insists, are “subservient unto his ends in the revelation of himself.” Owen acknowledges that the “doctrinal truths of the Scripture have a mutual respect ... and dependence on one another” and indeed may be disposed into “catechisms, systems of divinity, creeds, and confessions.” He notes that Romans, for example, has a “methodical disposition” which is also seen in some of the “best methods of teaching.” Nevertheless, he argues, God’s revelation in Scripture has not come as a “creed or confession,” but as “a collection of histories, prophecies, prayers, songs, letters or epistles.” He then argues that truths “have their power and efficacy upon our minds, not only from themselves, but from their posture in the Scripture.”

Of course, Owen is not completely dismissing the usefulness of confessions in all of this, but he is intent on articulating the absolute primacy of Scripture. It is not just a matter of ontology – that Scripture is “perfect” and “divine,” and confessions are “artificial” and “human.” Rather there is spiritual nourishment and divine communion in the ongoing investigation of Scripture – more specifically, through the different parts or genres of Scripture. Owen insists that if God had given a “stated and fixed system of doctrines” as the means of his self-disclosure, the Church would have been “always the same” and not “one jot more like unto God thereby.” The nature of divine revelation, to Owen, proves that God intended for his people to give themselves over to an ongoing process of scriptural rummaging. He concludes, “there is a more glorious power and efficacy in one epistle, one psalm, one chapter, than in all the writings of men,

---


136 *Causes, Ways, and Means*, in *Works*, 4:188

137 *Causes, Ways, and Means*, in *Works*, 4:189

138 I have not found a better word or phrase to summarize what Owen is suggesting.
though they have their use also.” And the whole of Scripture has a comprehensive, persuasive power in itself.

This section of Causes, Ways, and Means provides a personal/experiential parallel to the corporate/confessional context of the Savoy. It also relates to what was shown earlier from the Savoy Preface about its pilgrim orientation to theology and its suspicion of theological error. These issues come together to help answer a related question, Why confess anew when so many superb confessions have already been formulated?

As was noted previously, the Westminster Assembly had much debate about old and new confessional models. The adoption of an old creed (or creeds) would demonstrate continuity with the past and the unchangeableness of God’s truth. The formation of a new creed would better reflect current times, more adequately meet present needs, and would also demonstrate a commitment to ongoing reformation. As Van Dixhoorn notes, on the one hand, Edmund Calamy thought that the Westminster Assembly had been called to “reform the Reformation;” on the other hand, when the Assembly’s work was completed, the House of Lords were pleased to announce that the divines had not, in fact, reformed the church’s doctrine. Both perspectives are, of course, true in different ways. The WCF did not prove to be a departure from the substance of doctrine in the Thirty-Nine Articles, nor from any of the major Reformed confessions on the continent. Nevertheless, it was a new confession; further, it was a more thorough, more explicitly Reformed codification of doctrine. In that sense, it was an advance of reformation.

Similarly, Savoy’s model of starting with the WCF and making changes to it could be understood in two different ways: either in continuity with the (recent) past, or in appreciation for the “newest and best” (taking the “newest and best” and making it newer with revisions and a new name). The Savoy Preface never explicitly states which confessional outlook was assumed in the

139 Causes, Ways, and Means, in Works, 4:190.
140 “Reforming the Reformation,” pp. 353-54
141 Fifteen years previous was not exactly the ancient past, but these were quickly changing times!
Setting Up the Kingdom: Confessionalization

SDF, but its several references to creed-making and confessional assemblies certainly favor the latter—what is “newest and best.”

In the mid-seventeenth century a motivating factor behind a new confession or a confessional revision was often a polemical one: to more clearly delineate that a new teaching (e.g., Socinianism) fell beyond the scope of confessional orthodoxy. And, as has already been shown, the Savoy Preface mentioned this polemical dynamic as part of the explanation for its revisions to the WCF. Other revisions to the WCF were thought to be improvements or “clearer expressions” (xxi). But the Preface also repeatedly states that, in general, the work of any confessional assembly is for the ongoing retesting of established doctrine. Rather than bemoaning the multiplying of confessions of that day, as Baxter had done, the Savoy brethren rejoiced in it. This, they said, was “one of the greatest advantages ... of these times,” that “saints and ministers” had so often assembled to be “exercised in ... practical and experimental truths” (vii). It was also their own “lot, to examine and discuss, and indeed, anew to learn ... every doctrinal truth ... out of the Scriptures” (vii). In the re-inquisition of such truths, they “better convince others and establish their own hearts’ darkness, unbelief and the doubt of truth” (vii). In other words, as assemblies do their own doctrinal investigation and formulation, they emerge with a greater doctrinal and scriptural confidence than when they began. Owen is suspicious that truths can be “taken for granted” in a kind of mindless and lazy confessional allegiance, especially when they have “lived [in] the comfort of” them for a time (vii). Confessional assemblies, then, are to be “put upon a new search” of divine truth (vii).

Elsewhere, Owen warns that the “primitive church provided ... creeds and symbols, or confessions of faith ...,” but “in process of time they came to be abused, as expressing the sense of the present church, whether true or false.” Here, Owen has in mind...

---

142 See SDF, pp. vi, vii, x, and xxi.
143 See SDF, p. vi. Van Dixhoorn has shown that similar views were held by some at the Westminster Assembly. See “New Taxonomies of the Westminster Assembly,” 93-106.
the Roman Catholic Church, but his concern is that Rome’s present view of authority did not happen overnight. It was “in the process of time” that the creeds came to be “abused.” Thus, Owen believes that creeds can become abused when, whether “true or false,” the church merely assumes that they express the divine truth of the Scriptures. It is not clear whether this goes beyond or is simply a restatement of WCF, Chapter 33: “All synods or councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith and practice, but to be used as a help in both.” While this chapter was removed for the SDF, it was surely its synodical language that gave concern to the Savoyans, rather than its caution about error.

It is probably too much an understatement to say that Owen believed in the potential fallibility of assemblies, councils, and synods. Not infrequently he makes strong critical remarks about these bodies: e.g., that their canons are but hay and stubble; that in most of them brawls, pride, and ambition prevailed; that they were wrought with a foul spirit of darkness and error. While at times he acknowledges the orthodoxy of and appreciation for the ancient counsels, he elsewhere insists that “whatever ... their determination ... we are not at all concerned, knowing of nothing that is obligatory to us.” In other words, he certainly does not disagree with the doctrinal outcomes of Nicene or Chalcedon, but neither does he accept them because they are Nicene or Chalcedon.

Owen insists that there is always an ongoing need for the Church “to defend, improve, give and add new light unto old truths.” Such a concept of adding “new light unto old truths” at least suggests the possibility of a better articulation and fuller explanation of an old truth in a new confession; but, in fact, it goes further to include an improvement of old truths with “new

---

147 The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance Explained and Confirmed (1654), in Works, 11:11.
light.”\textsuperscript{148} This rather progressive approach to truth is also demonstrated in one of Owen’s earliest works, \textit{The Death of Death in the Death of Christ} (1647):

Every age hath its employment in the discovery of truth. We are not come to the bottom of vice or virtue …. No wonder, then, if all truth be not yet discovered …. Are all the depths of Scripture, where the elephants may swim, just fathomed to the bottom? Let any man observe the progress of the last century in unfolding the truths of God, and he will scarce be obstinate that no more is left as yet undiscovered.\textsuperscript{149}

Further, the Preface strikes an extremely experiential note about the work of new creed-making. In the testing, reconfirming, rewriting, and re-confessing process there is “a new conversion unto the truth” (viii), “a fresh taste ... in their own hearts” (vii). The Savoy Assemblymen were “together ... anew to experiment the power and sweetness of all these [truths] in their own souls” (viii). Therefore, in the process of retesting doctrine, there is also an experience of re-tasting that doctrine. The act of “confessing” in creed-making is likened unto conversion, to that first “confession” of Christ, using the language of Romans 10 (v). It is likened unto the worshipful singing of truth (v); like testifying of the gospel and like “prayer to God” such confession is merely “expressing what is written in [one’s] heart” (v). It gives “vigor and life” and has a “beauty and loveliness” to it (v). In short, it is an intensely experiential act to formulate a confession (or reformulate an existing one).

Interestingly enough, the recent doctoral work of Joel Halcomb has shown that the formulation of local confessions of faith was a cherished and celebrated exercise in individual


\textsuperscript{149} \textit{The Death of Death in the Death of Christ} (1647), in \textit{Works}, 10:151.
Congregationalist churches at the time. So Owen’s celebration of the creed-making in Savoy’s Preface may then be symptomatic of the broader Congregationalist outlook on ecclesial confessions.

Some of today’s Reformed, confessional churchmen may not appreciate such a sentimental and/or innovative confessional approach. As a work of history, though, this analysis of the Savoy’s approach to creed-making is not meant to be prescriptive or evaluative. To be sure, who could presume to know if Owen and the Savoyans would think differently outside of their own century; to know if, had they lived long enough, they would eventually have come to think that enough confessions had been written? That said, from a historical perspective, their views on confessions, confessionalization, and the process of creed-making need to be considered as one representation of the codification of Reformed theology in the seventeenth century.

Recent scholarly work on Owen has often painted a portrait of a classic representative of Reformed Orthodoxy, one in continuity with “the anti-Pelagian and Trinitarian tradition that stretched back from the seventeenth-century, past the Reformation, through the Middle Ages, and back to the writings of the early church fathers” — i.e., a traditionalist. And regarding certain doctrines and theological methodology that indeed is the case, as scholarly works have sufficiently demonstrated. But Owen’s confessional endeavors in the 1650s paint a slightly different picture — one slightly more progressive. Put another way, Owen stands in continuity with Calvin and the Reformed tradition on many important strictly doctrinal points, but less so when it comes to matters of liberty, political theology, and confessionalization (not to mention ecclesiology and eschatology which will be explored in following chapters). Even in his own day, he was something of a “middle-man” between unorthodox tolerationists (e.g., Milton) and the orthodox non-

---

151 Trueman, John Owen, p. 33.
152 In addition to the prodigious work of Carl Trueman is Rehnman, Divine Discourse; and most recently, Cleveland, Thomism in John Owen.
tolerationists (e.g., Rutherford). This portrait takes on greater nuance when we consider the origin of and sources for Owen’s view on liberty, and also observe that Owen demonstrates his own openness to the “discovery of truth.”

IV. Sources for Owen’s Ideals for the National Kingdom

Writing in 1658, in a rather rare autobiographical moment, Owen confesses that his present view of liberty has not always been the same. It is worth reading Owen’s account in his own words:

I remember that about fifteen years ago, meeting occasionally with a learned friend, we fell into some debate about the liberty that began then to be claimed by men, differing from what had been, and what was then likely to be established; having at that time made no farther inquiry into the grounds and reasons of such liberty, than what had occurred to me in the writings of the remonstrants, all whose plea was still pointed towards the advantage of their own interest, I delivered my judgment in opposition to the liberty pleaded for, which was then defended by my learned friend. Not many years after, discoursing the same difference with the same person, we found immediately that we had changed stations, I pleading for an indulgence of liberty, he for restraint .... [Therefore,] what arises from the embracing and pursuit of truth: my change I here own; my judgment is not the same in this particular, as it was fourteen years ago ....

Of course, Owen is painting here with a wide brush since, as has been shown throughout this chapter, there were many different shades or degrees of liberty, many nuances to the debate about

---

153 This is a point made in Coffey, “John Owen and the Puritan Toleration Controversy,” esp. pp. 234 and 242-48.

154 An Answer ... about the Nature of Schism (1658), in Works, 13:294 (emphasis added). To clarify the context of this passage, Owen’s broader point in this response to Daniel Cawdrey is that he had not changed his belief on other matters, especially schism, as Cawdrey had recently charged. However, his views on liberty are offered by Owen as one exception to his otherwise consistency.
Reformed and Reforming

liberty in mid-seventeenth century Britain. However, what has been shown above has also demonstrated that there were essentially two different sides or parties: some wrote works defending liberty, toleration, or nonconformity; others wrote against “pretended liberty.” It is in this sense that Owen had “changed stations.” This has seemingly gone overlooked heretofore. But what can be learned of this simple fact of a change of mind on liberty/toleration?

Because this shift is relatively early in Owen’s career, we have little from his pen that would more fully describe an earlier position on liberty. In fact, only one work before 1644 addresses liberty at all, even if indirectly: The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished (1643). As the title indicates, Owen articulates certain parameters and responsibilities in the church, distinguishable between “people” and “pastors.” In a section on “extraordinary callings” Owen addresses the question of public and pastoral preaching apart from national or synodical appointment. He argues that extraordinary callings could be legitimate, but only in extraordinary circumstances: 1) by immediate divine revelation, 2) when under an apostate national church, or 3) being shipwrecked to a “barbarous people.”

From here, Owen begins to anticipate some objections. Perhaps fearing that his treatment of “extraordinary callings” may seem too liberal to some, the first anticipated objection is that “this seems to favour all allowances of licentious conventicles.” His answer is important for purposes here, because it is the only paragraph in the Works to illuminate anything of his earlier position on liberty. And here once again there is a string of rather obscure names and works which beg to be pieced together.

156 For example: Samuel Rutherford, A Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty (1649); Thomas Edwards, Gangraena (1646); The Casting Down of Toleration (1647); William Pryne, The Sword of the Christian Magistracy Supported (1647).
157 An Answer ... About the Nature of Schism, in Works, 13:294.
159 Pastors and People, in Works, 13:47.
I conceive the law layeth hold of none, as peccant in such a kind, but only those who have pre-declared themselves to be opposers of the worship of God in the public assemblies of that church wherein they live. Now, the patronage of any such I before rejected. Neither do I conceive that they ought at all to be allowed the benefit of private meetings who wilfully abstain from the public congregations, so long as the true worship of God is held forth in them. Yea, how averse I have ever been from that kind of confused licentiousness in any church, I have some while since declared, in an answer (drawn up for my own and private friends’ satisfaction) to the arguments of the Remonstrants in their Apology, and replies to Vedelius, with other treatises, for such a “liberty of prophesying,” as they term it… 

Owen’s point regards authority and liberty, particularly the question: should the citizens be permitted to neglect church attendance when true worship is held in public congregations? Reflecting his earlier (stricter) position on toleration, he responds in vehement opposition. Apparently Owen had stated this position before in an unpublished (and non-extant) position paper, which was a response to “the arguments of the Remonstrants in their Apology, and replies to Vedelius, with other treatises.” To my knowledge no theologian or historian has yet attempted to reconstruct Owen’s thought behind these odd references, nor what they may mean (if anything) for the evolution of his position on liberty.

Most likely what Owen has in mind is a string of documents which comprised no small debate in Holland in the previous decades:

- In 1621 the Dutch Remonstrants published the *Confession or Declaration of the Remonstrant Pastors*;
- The Leiden faculty responded to this *Confession* with *A Censure*;
- In 1629, Simon Episcopius (perhaps the main author behind the *Confession*) replied to the Leiden Censure with

Reformed and Reforming

Apologia pro Confessione Remonstrantium. This is what Owen means by “their Apology;”

- In reply to Episcopius, Nicholas Vedelius wrote De Arcana Arminianismi (1631);
- Episcopius in turn responded to Vedelius with Vedelius Rhapsodus (1633).

Not surprisingly, the differences in Arminian and Calvinistic soteriologies occupied no small part of this print between the Remonstrants, the Leiden professors, Episcopius, and Vedelius. But less well known is that their debate also heavily involved many of the issues already explored in this chapter — matters such as the public ministry of the Word, ordination, the nature of the church, sacraments, church discipline, synods, councils, liberty, conscience, etc. Indeed, the last five chapters of the Remonstrants’ Confession are concerned with these matters. And it is certainly this part of the Holland debate that Owen has in mind when he references the “arguments of the Remonstrants.” This is apparently also what he had in mind when he later referred to the Remonstrants again in 1658. Recounting his earlier position on liberty, he writes:

Having at that time made no farther inquiry into the grounds and reasons of such liberty than what had occurred to me in the writings of the Remonstrants, whose plea was still pointed towards the advantage of their own interests, I delivered my judgment in opposition to the liberty pleaded for ..."162

With two different references to the Remonstrants’ position on liberty — one representing his earlier position, and the other recounting Owen’s earlier position — attention should be raised. Within a year of his change on liberty, Owen had only “the writings of the Remonstrants” in front of him. This raises the

161 This is over 40 pages in the English translation printed in England in 1676: Remonstrantse Broederschap, The Confession or Declaration of the Ministers or Pastors which in the United Provinces are called Remonstrants, chapters 21-25, pp. 222-64.

162 An Answer ... About the Nature of Schism (1658), in Works, 13:294 (emphasis added).
Setting Up the Kingdom: Confessionalization

question of how the Remonstrants’ views might compare with Owen’s later position on liberty and related matters. The answer is that they are remarkably similar.

Comparing the descriptions and constructs for liberty by Owen and his companions in the 1650s with the systematic descriptions laid out in the Remonstrants’ Confession of 1621, there are close to a dozen parallels:

- the unique view of the magistrate,\(^{163}\)
- emphasis on the visible church with particular congregations being responsible for their own discipline\(^ {164}\) and governed by their own ministers,\(^{165}\)
- occasional use of ecclesiastical assemblies,\(^{166}\)
- liberty especially for differences of liturgy and church government,\(^ {167}\)
- liberty also for those who otherwise consciously dissent,\(^ {168}\)
- distinction between fundamental articles and finer doctrinal points,\(^ {169}\)
- not using force, but reason and Scripture;\(^ {170}\)
- holding forth those beliefs necessary for salvation and seeking to persuade,\(^ {171}\)
- theological self-suspicion, or a commitment to the ongoing investigation of Scripture and a willingness to be corrected if convinced.\(^ {172}\)

---

\(^{163}\) Remonstrants Confession, pp. 254, 258.
\(^{164}\) Remonstrants Confession, p. 246.
\(^{165}\) Remonstrants Confession, p. 254. These ecclesiological matters will receive fuller examination in the next chapter.
\(^{166}\) Remonstrants Confession, pp. 254-55.
\(^{167}\) Remonstrants Confession, p. 244.
\(^{168}\) Remonstrants Confession, pp. 257-59.
\(^{169}\) Remonstrants Confession, p. 257.
\(^{170}\) Remonstrants Confession, pp. 257-59.
\(^{171}\) Remonstrants Confession, p. 262.
The Remonstrants’ *Confession* even ends with practically the exact same words as those which close out the Savoy’s Preface: “whereunto by the help and guidance of Christ we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, and be alike minded or affected. And if in any thing we be otherwise-minded, God will reveal even this unto us.”¹⁷³

Of course, there are some differences between the Remonstrants and Owen on liberty and the related matters. Not least would be that in the later 1650s Owen may have been growing less tolerant of Arminians as part of the public ministry of a British church settlement. His polemic against Arminian soteriology was certainly consistent throughout his life.¹⁷⁴ But as pertaining to the broader structures of religious politics — the Christian magistrate, the ministry, liberty, the nature of the church (its government and worship), the inevitability of dissent, etc. — there are important similarities. Further, when in a 1646 work Owen categorizes the different views on liberty available at the time, he identifies one of the positions as that which the “Remonstrants pressed hard for.”¹⁷⁵ His description of this view¹⁷⁶ seems to fit best with the description of his own view of liberty which proceeds shortly after.¹⁷⁷

These multiple references and similarities then are perhaps more than coincidental. This is not meant to suggest that Owen

---


¹⁷⁶ Owen writes of this view, which he attributes to the Remonstrants: “some by a toleration understand a mutual forbearance in communion, though there be great differences in opinion; and this the generality of the clergy (as heretofore they were called) did usually incline unto — viz., that any men almost might be tolerated, whilst they did not separate. And these lay down this for a ground, that there is a latitude in judgment to be allowed; so that the communion may be held by men of several persuasions, in all things, with an allowance of withdrawing in those particulars wherein there is dissent amongst them ...” (“A Country Essay,” in *Works*, 8:57).

came to his views on matters of liberty through the Remonstrants directly; certainly not that he came to his views from the Remonstrants only. To my knowledge Owen never attributes any of his views to the Remonstrants generally or Episcopius specifically. But Owen does acknowledge that their writings comprised his first real reading on the subject of liberty. He initially found their arguments to only be self-serving survival tactics. But from Owen’s own pen we learn that a year later he came to embrace liberty generally. And throughout the political-ecclesiastical experiments of the 1650s he undoubtedly realized how closely his views (views, of course, shared by many in England and New England) paralleled the Remonstrants’ earlier statements. Perhaps, in the process, he also (quietly) leaned upon those writings he had once rejected. Perhaps that speculates too much. Then again, some sort of Dutch connection is almost undeniable with Owen’s companions Philip Nye and Thomas Goodwin, who for a time found toleration and effective ministry in Holland in the wake of the Remonstrants’ disputes about liberty. While Nye and Goodwin had more theological affinity with the Dutch Calvinists their views on ecclesiology, liberty, and the magistrate were closer to the Remonstrants, as their Apologetical Narration attested shortly after their return to England.

Regardless of any Dutch connections to the views of liberty held by Owen and his Interregnum partners, it is important to note that there were very different theological foundations which led Owen and Episcopius to their very similar views on toleration. For Episcopius it was his libertine freedom that necessitated liberty and forbade coercion. For Owen and the English Congregationalists, it was the total depravity of the unregenerate, the necessity of the Spirit drawing and instructing, the transcendence of God, and the fallibility of all ectypal theology which necessitated their view of liberty and non-coercion. That said, it also speaks to the difficulty of taxonomies or party-lines of
the seventeenth century that Owen’s view of the national kingdom was closer to Arminians in Holland than many Presbyterians in England — that is, until the Act of Uniformity and Great Ejection (1662) when tolerationist Congregationalists and non-tolerationist Presbyterians were (rather ironically) united by force.

Owen’s writings on kingdom, liberty, and confessions in the post-Restoration years will be more briefly considered in the remainder of this chapter.¹⁸¹

V. Kingdom and Confessions, post-1662

Though often small and published anonymously, Owen may have written more separate works, tracts, and sermons on toleration and nonconformity than any other single category in his Works. By anyone’s reckoning he was a leading figure among the nonconformists, enjoying some political/cultural respectability and freedoms that others did not — freedoms which he used for the cause of defending nonconformity and nonconformists.¹⁸² These efforts demonstrate an essential continuity with his beliefs before the Restoration, concurrently with several points of flexibility.

A. Consistencies in Nonconformity

Owen’s most frequent argument for nonconformists’ liberty in the post-Restoration years is the distinction between doctrinal

¹⁸¹ Owen’s post-Restoration works can be dealt with more briefly for a few reasons: (1) by nature these are reactive to his persecuted circumstances and hence less telling than the more proactive evidence from the 1650s; (2) for the purposes of this chapter it only needs to be considered whether Owen’s views changed in these very different circumstances post-1662 — or at least how his language, flexibility, and goals changed; (3) Owen’s post-1662 views of liberty, government, nonconformity, schism, etc., have been far less neglected by scholars than what has been the focus of this chapter. On this last point, see: Lim, “The Trinity, Adiaphora, Ecclesiology, and Reformation,” 281-300; Cooper, John Owen, Richard Baxter, pp. 259-300; Lee, “All Subjects of the Kingdom of Christ,” Williams, “God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen,” pp. 236ff; Cook, “A Political Biography of ... John Owen,” pp. 281ff.

¹⁸² See Cooper, John Owen, Richard Baxter, pp. 271-75.
belief and ecclesiastical practice— the latter (such as forms of worship and church polity) not being demanded or persecuted by the state.\textsuperscript{183} As this chapter has shown, that distinction was an argument utilized by the Dissenting Brethren at Westminster Assembly; it was passed into legislation in 1647 (that those unable to conform to the ecclesiastical polity of the state would still enjoy liberty).\textsuperscript{184} This distinction was spelled out in the \textit{Humble Petition and Advice}; it was also discussed in the Savoy’s lengthy Preface, and modeled in the Savoy’s move to separate doctrinal theses (\textit{Declaration of Faith}) from points of ecclesiastical practice (\textit{Church Order}). Of course, for almost all of those in power after the Restoration, being reminded of such precedents would have done little good. Therefore, Owen cites many and diverse witnesses on the distinction between doctrinal belief and ecclesiastical forms—from the Reformed on the continent to the “first churches after the days of the apostles” to Justin Martyr; even “the great Constantine himself... declared that... liberty of worship was not to be denied unto any.”\textsuperscript{185}

He also argues his case theologically. As did the Savoy Preface, Owen’s later pleas for toleration frequently appeal to the uncertainty of matters with which the godly have disagreed—here again citing the diversity born out of the Reformation, but also its precedent in Scripture.\textsuperscript{186} This “fallibilist argument for toleration,”\textsuperscript{187} insists that no man can or should act “not according to their light.”\textsuperscript{188} God has not given all saints the same light, and men cannot ascend beyond the light attained. Such theological humility is not a shibboleth or false humility; that said, neither is it the fullest picture of his beliefs regarding these

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{183} See, for example, \textit{A Peace Offering, Etc.} (1667), in \textit{Works}, 13:542-74.
\bibitem{185} \textit{Truth and Innocence Vindicated} (1669), in \textit{Works}, 13:564.
\bibitem{186} \textit{An Answer unto Dr Stillingfleet’s Book} (1681), in \textit{Works}, 15:405ff. See also \textit{A Peace Offering}, in \textit{Works}, 8:533.
\bibitem{187} This is Coffey’s language, in “John Owen and the Puritan Toleration Controversy,” p. 233.
\bibitem{188} See \textit{Works}, 8:431, 499, 558 on liberty “according to light.” See also Preface, \textit{SDF}, pp. viii-ix, xxix.
\end{thebibliography}
Reformed and Reforming

matters *adiaphora*. More often, Owen’s argument against England’s present imposition of liturgy and Episcopal polity is in a vehement disagreement, not ambivalence, to them. Such formulations of worship and systems of discipline, says Owen, are nowhere found in Scripture, and thus may not be demanded and forced upon the saints. In fact, by doing so, England was leading its church back to Rome and undoing the Reformation.

In the 1650s Owen had no need to write about the “evils” of liturgical imposition or Episcopal government, since it looked like the tide was heading in the favor of his brand of Puritanism. It is not an inconsistency, then, with his earlier ideals that he writes of such impositions in the decades of nonconformity. Circumstances dictated that his same principles require different application and emphases. But his same basic theological assumptions, desires for reform, and concerns for the church were still in place and at work post-1662.

Owen’s post-Restoration writings maintain an unswerving belief in the role of the magistrate in matters of religion. Though he was frequently questioned on the consistency of his position (likely only because of his nonconformity), he was steadfast in his commitment to the ideal of a godly magistrate. It is worth quoting at some length from his answer to Stillingfleet’s questioning

---

189 On the question of *adiaphora* in Owen’s thought and context, see Lim, “The Trinity, Adiaphora, Ecclesiology, and Reformation,” 281-300.


191 As Lim notes, Owen agreed with the temporary imposition of liturgy in the Edwardian Reformation due to the inadequate number of ministers, the inadequacies of their ministerial training, and the sheer need to adapt quickly to a Reformed belief and practice. He, therefore, also believed in the “timely expiration” for use of the Prayer Book. Thus, imposing a liturgy now over 100 years after Cramner was a move in un-reformation. Owen’s pleas for liberty then were attempts to get back to “real reformation,” and continued reformation (Lim, “The Trinity, Adiaphora, Ecclesiology, and Reformation,” 296-97).
because, here, Owen explicitly ties his present position in 1680 to what was stated in the SDF:

Those who are commonly called Independents expressed their apprehension of the magistrate’s power in and about religion in their Confession, made 1659. That any of them have, on what hath ensued, changed their opinion therein I know not. And, for my part, I ... do profess myself at this day to be of the same judgment ... wherein we acknowledge the magistrate’s power and duty in matters of religion, as much as ever ....

Owen quickly qualifies this commitment to the magistrate — yet, in doing so, he only further rounds out the view of the magistrate and liberty that had received so frequent exposition in his pre-Restoration days:

... [not] to coerce and punish with all sorts of mulcts, spoiling of goods, imprisonments, banishments, and in some cases death itself, such persons as hold the Head and all the fundamental principles of Christian religion entire, whose worship is free from idolatry, whose conversations are peaceable and useful .... And it may be, common prudence would advise a forbearance of too much severity in charges on others for changing their opinions ....

Again, Owen’s position and language on liberty and the magistrate are the same on either side of the 1662-divide. He held the same beliefs both when he had power and when he was persecuted.

There are, however, a few points of flexibility in Owen’s post-Restoration writings.

B. Flexibility in Nonconformity

While Owen maintained and frequently employed that argument of distinguishing between doctrinal belief and

---

192 A Brief Vindication of the Nonconformists from the Charge of Schism (1680), in Works, 13:314.
ecclesiastical practice, the specific referent points had necessarily changed in the post-Restoration years. Meaning, the Act of Uniformity not only brought the reinstatement of the Book of Common Prayer but also a return to the Thirty-Nine Articles. Thus, for Owen’s argument — i.e., unity in doctrine and liberty in ecclesiastical practice — to work in a post-Restoration context, he would have to assent to the Thirty-Nine Articles. And this he could certainly do, as he states many times over. That which is “purely doctrinal” in the Church of England’s present confession, “we fully embrace and constantly adhere unto,” he insists.¹⁹⁴

Owen acknowledges that “there are some enlargements in our confession [the SDF], ... some additions of things not expressly contained” in the Thirty-Nine Articles.¹⁹⁵ He explains these differences much like he did in the Savoy Preface that some changes “were necessitated unto for the full declaration of our minds, and to obviate that obloquy which otherwise we might have been exposed unto, as reserving our judgment in matters that had received great public debate since the composure of” the Thirty-Nine Articles. However, he insists, “there is not any proposition in our whole confession which is repugnant unto any thing contained in the articles, or is not by just consequence deducible from them.” Then, turning to praise (if not flattery), he suggests that the Savoy and any “enlargements” therein are only “what we have learned and been instructed in from the writings of the most famous divines of this nation, bishops and others, ever since the Reformation.” The Articles, “being published by legal authority, have been always esteemed, both at home and abroad, faithfully to represent the doctrine of the church of England.”¹⁹⁶

Though shrewd, such commentary was not false or pretended. The Thirty-Nine Articles made up a basic statement of evangelical


¹⁹⁵ A Peace Offering, Etc., in Works 13:552.

¹⁹⁶ A Peace Offering, Etc., in Works 13:552.
orthodox with clear Calvinistic soteriology. Owen could and did assent to far less robust confessions (such as the sixteen “Principles” in 1652). The Thirty-Nine Articles may not have been his ideal — indeed it was not his ideal as his other confessional efforts in the 1650s prove — but he was a somewhat mobile man within the strong currents of post-Restoration seas. And yet, because Owen died six years before the Toleration Act of 1689, he never saw the next chapter in the story. His decades-long efforts to plead for liberty and to flex in a disenfranchised context, fell on deaf ears (at least politically speaking).

As another example of his flexibility in post-Restoration years, Owen attests that he would have been amicable to a Presbyterian church-state had that been the settlement provided upon the king’s restoration. Of course, by that he means “without a rigorous imposition of every thing” — that is, without the imposition of liturgical forms and uniformity of church discipline. This is essentially what the 1647 act (allowing for dissent) envisioned, and what the Dissenting Brethren had at times pleaded for: concession being made within an essentially Presbyterian church-state. Looking back decades later, Owen surmised that it “would have been a matter of no great art… to unite” [Presbyterians and Congregationalists], or to “maintain a firm communion among them; no more than in the days of the apostles” when differences of order and worship no doubt existed. Owen anticipates the question from his readers, Why then did the great Assembly not come to an agreement? Owen replies only, “I was none of them, and cannot tell.”

One other point of post-Restoration flexibility will suffice. As the years of the Restoration pressed on, so too did Owen’s concern for the influx of the Roman Church, culminating in his suspicion that England could soon return to Rome. Thus, his later years produced several polemics against Catholics on the nature of the church, Protestantism, and the charge of schism. He also produced sermons/tracts addressed to Protestants warning of

---

the Roman incursion. One of those was the small tract, “Some Considerations about Union Among Protestants” (1680). And here Owen, rather remarkably, entertains the dismantling of England’s church-state. His argument moves along the following theses:

- England at present has “a protestant king, a protestant parliament, protestant magistrates, protestant ministers, a protestant confession of faith ... with the cordial agreement of ... the people.”

- However, because some men have obtained their power and exercise their authority “unto their own advantage,” and are “oppressive to the people” by “perpetuating differences among Protestants,” it is not impossible that “Popery should return” to England.

- If Popery shall return to England, it will be through her present “church constitution,” not by force or war. Then the “whole nation will quickly be ... betrayed into Popery.” Especially if one day she is “influenced by a popish prince, the religion of the whole nation will be lost immediately.”

- But “if there be no public machine [no church-state] ... to turn about the whole body” it will be “impossible that ... Popery should become the religion of this nation.” Therefore, “set [the people] at liberty, so as that every parliament, every magistrate, every minister, every good Christian, may judge that the preservation of their religion is their own duty ..., and Popery with all its arts will know [not] how to begin” against them.

200 In the same year Owen preached a sermon “The Use of Faith if Popery Should Return Upon Us” (1680), in Works, 9:505-16. He began the sermon with hyperbolic-but-telling claim: “Half the talk of the world is upon this subject” (p. 505).

201 Owen himself does not break his tract into the following theses. The bullet points below are my own, as a means of more easily and quickly communicating the flow of his thought.

202 “Some Considerations about Union Among Protestants” (1680), in Works, 14:524.

203 “Some Considerations about Union Among Protestants,” in Works, 14:525.
Setting Up the Kingdom: Confessionalization

- A “church-state ... in the management of a few is seducible, and not difficult to be possessed ....” But if there be “no such church-state, ... the world knows not how to attack it, much less endanger it ....”
- It is not difficult “to declare a way for the security of the protestant religion, with the rights of government and liberties of the subjects, with the due freedom of conscience, without any such church-state.” That is what “religion, common prudence, and the honest interest of the nation do direct unto ....”

Owen then closes with five brief practical recommendations for the nation and its rulers:

- A fresh national renunciation of Popery;
- The Thirty-Nine Articles being heartily subscribed to by all in public ministry;
- The magistrate assuming its proper exercise of power for the protection of the Protestant religion, the punishment of trouble-makers, and the encouragement of peace between God’s people;
- Securing the Protestant faith with the “sedulous preaching of the gospel in all parts ... of the land;”
- Permitting “variety in outward rites” with “every protestant ... at liberty to join in protestant Christian worship, and to partake of all church ordinances” in a way “of his own choosing.” Then “will be all preserved.”

What can be concluded about this neglected yet important tract? To begin with, Owen is not here suggesting a separation of church and state, as his third practical application makes clear by its support of the magistrate’s role in religion. However,

---

204 “Some Considerations about Union Among Protestants,” in Works, 14:525.
205 “Some Considerations about Union Among Protestants,” in Works, 14:526.
206 “Some Considerations about Union Among Protestants,” in Works, 14:527.
207 “Some Considerations about Union Among Protestants,” in Works, 14:527.
something has clearly changed in his rhetoric by this point (or perhaps just for this moment?). Nowhere else does Owen speak so disparagingly, so hopelessly about the church-state. And yet, his argument in this short work is predominantly, or even solely, a pragmatic one. It is a strategic defense. There is no theologizing on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the church-state here. Owen is simply addressing a possible threat, and offering a rather sensible solution. He likely did not come to adopt a different ideal for a national kingdom. He is most likely not lamenting or renouncing his own kingdom-settling efforts of the 1650s. But the days of the Protectorate must have felt like a world and a lifetime away by 1680. In fact his last few years of his life were the least hopeful—at least humanly speaking. His words to Charles Fleetwood from his deathbed reveal both sorrow and surety:

I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm, but while the great Pilot is in it the loss of a poore under-rower will be inconsiderable. Live and pray and hope and waite patiently and doe not despair; the promise stands invincible that he will never leave thee nor forsake thee.

VI. Conclusion

With or without a church-state, Owen’s interests and concerns were much the same in his final years as they ever were. His advice to English Protestants in the 1680 tract was much the same as what he preached in the 1640s, attempted in the 1650s, and tried to recover in the 1660s: the preservation of the gospel in the face of its foes (Socinian or Catholic), the need for a godly kingdom and godly rule, the unity of Christ’s people, the proclamation of the gospel in the land, liberty for true worship

208 Williams devotes a paragraph to “Some Considerations about Union,” but quite mistakenly sees no difference between this work and anything else in Owen’s earlier material (“God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen,” p. 311).

and discipline, and the primacy of local assemblies with saints volitionally joining themselves to them.\textsuperscript{210}

While we will intermittently return to the theme of liberty in later chapters, it is the local church context to which we shall now turn for the primary focus of the following chapter.

Chapter 4

The Keys of the Kingdom: The Nature, Power, and Government of the Church*

The ongoing reformation of England’s religion and worship in the mid-seventeenth century was, for Owen, to be considered civilly and nationally, but also locally and congregationally. The kingdom of Christ was civil/national, but also local/congregational. At the heart of the heated ecclesiological debates was the meaning the “keys of the kingdom” in Matt. 16:19. The matter of the “keys” was also fundamental to Owen’s move from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism. And yet, scholars have varied greatly in their analyses of Owen’s earliest ecclesiology, his change in ecclesiology, the tenets of his later ecclesiology, and the consistencies (or lack thereof) of his ecclesiology. Secondary literature consistently paints Owen within the portrait of the quintessential Congregationalist.1 This chapter will attempt resolution on some important debated matters of his ecclesiology, while also exploring whether he is indeed a typical Congregationalist among his peers, especially on the matter of the “keys of the kingdom.”

1 Portions of this chapter were previously published in Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), chap. 39.

1 For example, Geoffrey Nuttall: “By his (relative) longevity, as well as by his genuine eminence and his vigour as an apologist, John Owen came to be accepted as personifying [the Congregational] tradition more than any other single man.” See Nuttal, Visible Saints: The Congregational Way, 1640-1660 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), p. 42.
I. Introduction

The preceding chapter observed Owen’s personal testimony about an early change in his view of liberty.\(^2\) A year earlier, Owen had offered a similar autobiographical account on another modification that took place around the same time as his change on liberty — a change in his ecclesiology, moving from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism. Owen’s fascinating (and unusually personal) narrative has often been quoted in the secondary literature, but never scrutinized.\(^3\) As we shall see, it is rich with insight not only for his ecclesiastical transformation but also for his general approach to the testing and trying of theological options in view of theological progression — another matter that was addressed in the last chapter. We will let Owen speak for himself:

\(^2\) See Works, 13:294.

Indeed, not long after [writing The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished (1643)], 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 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 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 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 the 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 one 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. And, indeed, this way of impartial examining all things by the word, comparing causes with causes and things with things, laying aside all prejudicate respects unto persons or present traditions, is a course that I would admonish all to beware of who would avoid the danger of being made Independents.

A number of observations should be made about this narrative. In the early 1640s Owen was generally ignorant of the Congregationalist position; indeed, he believed he had only seen maybe one Congregationalist in his life thus far. He, however, not only understood Presbyterianism and understood himself to be

---

4 The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished (1643), in Works, 13:1-49. The title page shows 1644 as its publication date, but Owen later explains that this was a misprint and it was published in 1643 (see Works, 13:222).

one at that time, but he came to his serious inquiry of Congregationalism in “opposition unto” it, intent on a “confutation” of it. It was, then, “quite ... contrary” to his “expectation” that he would end up a Congregationalist at the end of it. In such days, a move from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism was surely not seen as an advantageous one. In fact, Owen thought that he “could expect nothing .. but ruin in this world” from this identification. Similarly, he insists that it was not any new associations, relationships, or personal conversations that gave Congregationalism its drawing power.

How was it, then, that he was “prevailed” upon to “receive” the Congregational way? His testimony highlights several integral parts to his personal inquiry of ecclesiology, which, he also attests, was his “manner in other controversies” as well. It began with a general analysis of “sundry books” on both sides of the debate. He then determined which representative of the “contrary” position was most methodical and strong, in order to give “peculiar consideration” to that one. In this case, it was John Cotton’s, The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven. Owen attests that his own record of notes and quotes on the book (“animadversions”) was substantial and remains as proof of his diligent examination of it. With both the general perusal of “sundry books” and in the careful examination of Cotton’s Keyes, Owen carefully compared them with Scripture. Simply put, he examined it all “by the word.” Owen stresses that he was striving for an “impartial examination.” It was an analytical and scholastic study of these books and Scripture: “comparing causes with causes and things with things.”

---

6 Cotton’s The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven was first published in 1642, reprinted in 1643, and republished in London 1644 with a preface by Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye. All references to The Keyes in this chapter will be to its 1644 publication (if only because it is the most accessible and most frequently referenced edition).

7 While it does not necessarily represent a doctrinal change, Owen’s examination of the doctrine of the atonement as described in The Death of Death (1647) is similar. It was, according to Owen, “a more than seven-years’ serious inquiry ... into the mind of God about these things, with a serious perusal of all which I could attain that the wit of man, in former or latter days, hath published in opposition to the truth” (Works, 10:149). See also his multi-page autobiographical account of re-
He warns (now with the bias of a convinced Congregationalist) that those who will lay “aside all prejudice” and “present traditions” for a careful study of these matters is in “danger of being made Independents” too.

A number of questions, however, remain regarding Owen’s move from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism. The secondary literature is fraught with conflicting interpretations. Some have argued, for instance, that there is no discernable difference between Owen’s ecclesiology before and after this so-called “change.” Similarly, for Sinclair Ferguson, Owen became a Congregationalist “not so much by changing his views, … [but] the views he already held were closer to congregationalism than contemporary Presbyterianism!” Similarly, some have entertained the “possibility … that Owen never understood Presbyterianism adequately.” Others still have argued that Owen never veered too far from his early Presbyterianism roots, occasionally bouncing back to within the fold throughout his days, and clearly returning to it at the end. Further complicating matters, in Tom Webster’s view, it is inaccurate to even speak of “proto-Presbyterian” and “proto-Congregational” polities in 1643 since they had not yet been defined or delineated. In short, opinions have been legion, and consensus wanting.

This chapter, therefore, seeks to reconstruct key parts of Owen’s ecclesiology that were integral to his earlier and later beliefs in order to understand the reasons for and processes of this theological development. It will not provide a full summary of the evaluating of the doctrine of the necessity of the atonement in the Preface to A Dissertation on Divine Justice (1653), in Works, 10:486-94.

9 Ferguson, John Owen on the Christian Life, p. 162.
12 Owen is not referenced specifically but certainly falls within the sweeping statement. See Tom Webster, Godly Clergy in Early Stuart England: The Caroline Puritan Movement, c. 1620-1643 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), p. 327.
tenets and practices of Puritan Congregationalism in general or Owen in particular. It will focus on the matters most debated and most neglected in previous studies of Owen’s ecclesiology, particularly the nature of his shift in ecclesiology, the influence of Cotton’s *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven* on that shift, and Owen’s own interpretation of the “keys” in Matt. 16:19. Secondarily, this analysis will also highlight some of the exegetical and practical differences between Presbyterians and Congregationalists in mid-seventeenth century, and contribute to the ongoing historiography of the ecclesiastical debates about “further reformation” in the mid-seventeenth century British Isles.

Before proceeding, however, a quick word about terminology is in order. In the seventeenth century the terms Presbyterianism and Congregationalism (as well as Prelate, Erastian, Baptist, Separatist, etc.) were broad labels, often with hazy demarcations. The terms were variously used and understood by those who embraced them as their own — even more by those who saw fit to (often inaccurately) label and describe the beliefs and practices of those with whom they crossed theological swords. Further complicating matters is that recent historians have continued to reappraise the ecclesiastical landscape of the English Revolution; each new reassessment suggesting a seemingly more complex, nuanced (or blurry) taxonomy than the last.¹³ And, indeed, these

ecclesiastical labels have been reductionist in the hands of older historiography. Yet it is also important to acknowledge the seemingly obvious reality that Congregationalist and Presbyterian are labels that many seventeenth century figures used of themselves. While they often sought nuanced clarification about their beliefs, practices, and terminology — especially in response to pejorative critics — they did not see such labels as altogether hopeless and useless. This is especially important in the case of Owen. Though he can be found, at times, to bemoan the difficulty of the typical denominating terms of his own day,\textsuperscript{14} he also, and much more frequently, places himself voluntarily under banners such as Presbyterian and Congregationalist at different times in his life.

This chapter will, therefore, occasionally note the complexity and nuances of simple labels and party-lines but will otherwise utilize the terms Presbyterian and Congregationalist to delineate the general differences of polity. Both the difficulty of taxonomy and the distinct general party lines can be better appreciated through a literary exchange which produced Owen’s account of his change from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism.

II. A Window into Debate: Cawdrey v. Owen

For reasons not entirely clear (it being five years before the Act of Uniformity) Owen wrote Of Schism in 1657.\textsuperscript{15} The Presbyterian Daniel Cawdrey responded, with another two rounds of replies ensuing from each author.\textsuperscript{16} Cawdrey charged Owen

---

\textsuperscript{14} See “The Glory and Interest of Nations Professing the Gospel” (1659), in Works, 8:470.

\textsuperscript{15} Of Schism (1657), in Works, 13:90-206.

\textsuperscript{16} Cawdrey, Independencie a Great Schism (1657); Owen, A Vindication of the Treatise about the True Nature of Schism, etc. (1657), in Works, 13:208-75; Cawdrey, Independencie Further Proved to be a Schism (1658); Owen, An Answer to the Late Treatise
with a number of inconsistencies between *Of Schism* and his earlier *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* (1643). Many of his charges of inconsistency are unjustifiable, even petty; however, it is Cawdrey’s rhetoric on Owen’s alleged inconsistencies or possible changes which is noteworthy:

... to run from opinion to opinion, from way to way, from truth to errour, (as many have done) nor only to contrariety but to contradiction also; and take no notice of the difference of judgment, and inconsistency of opinions and waies, is too palpable a discovery of an unsettled Spirit, that knows not where to fix. All the hope is that if their new notions, & waies be really discovered, & ingenuously by them acknowledged to be erroneous, they that can change from truth, to errour, may in Gods good time ... change back again from errour to truth.\textsuperscript{17}

Owen seemed quite aware of the street-value of such accusations.\textsuperscript{18} While he quickly dismissed many of these alleged inconsistencies, regarding his view of liberty and his ecclesiastical polity he readily (and rather thoroughly) acknowledged a change in his position since writing *Pastors and People*, as we have seen in the previous and present chapters, respectively. Cawdrey, however, broadened his argument from the illegitimacy of Congregationalism to a much more personal critique of character and reliability. He argued that Owen and his kind are generally fickle, restless, enamored with the novel, suspicious of the old; and hence are always changing sides in a debate. Perhaps someday they will (almost accidently) get it right once again.\textsuperscript{19} In point of fact, almost all Congregationalists of the seventeenth century would have had to acknowledge that they have not always held to this polity. Whether they had learned of it in Puritan Cambridge, Holland, or America; whether they had been persuaded by

---

about the *Nature of Schism* (1658), in *Works*, 13:278-302 — the last of which Owen originally published with a manuscript he held from the late John Cotton, together as *A Defence of Mr. John Cotton from the Charge of Self Contradiction* (1658).

\textsuperscript{17} Cawdrey, *Independencie a Great Schism*, pp. 218-19.

\textsuperscript{18} See *A Vindication*, in *Works*, 13:222-27.

\textsuperscript{19} Cawdrey, *Independencie a Great Schism*, pp. 218-19.
William Ames, Henry Jacob, or John Cotton, in these days Congregationalists were not born; they were made.\textsuperscript{20}

We belabor this exchange because it highlights a number of matters for the broader political-ecclesiological debates of the time. First, Cawdrey’s charge is exemplary of the evolving (or devolving) rhetoric of theological debates in the mid-seventeenth century, where an argument could quickly turn from exegetical arguments or quotations of the fathers to more of a playground rhetoric, mixing wit, exaggeration, humor, and mockery.\textsuperscript{21} Of course, Owen was not innocent of similar scornful rhetoric — e.g., referring to part of Cawdrey’s work as “a juvenile epiphonema, divinely spoken ... like a true Presbyterian ....”\textsuperscript{22}

Secondly, this exchange highlights the competing perspectives regarding the reformation project itself — namely the question, how much reformation was still needed in England? A related question was, which is better: the “new” or the “old”? Of course, these are very general categories; in reality, there were many shades of gray rather than black and white groupings. And in many ways Owen’s outlook on reform was closer to Cawdrey’s than either’s outlook was to John Milton or William Laud. But Cawdrey, like many in his day, was not abashed to speak, when useful, in such black and white terms; thus he treats Owen as categorically progressive, simply because Owen was more progressive than himself.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{20} On this point, see Webster, \textit{Godly Clergy}, esp. pp. 157-66, 286-309.


\textsuperscript{23} On the one hand, Cawdrey opposed Archbishop Laud’s ecclesiastical policies and was known as a nonconformist in the 1630s. Similarly, in 1662 he was one of the many Puritan ministers ejected under the Act of Uniformity. He was also an important member of the Westminster Assembly. On the other hand, he was vehemently opposed to the religious ideals of the New Model Army in the Revolution and defended Charles I. His opposition to “Independency” began with \textit{Vindiciæ Clavium} (1645) which took aim at John Cotton’s writings. Throughout the 1650s he...
Thirdly, Cawdrey’s comments exemplify one representative sentiment of the day — that there is something rather shameful about changing sides in a debate. He suggests that it signals a weakness of mind or conviction if one needs to change positions.²⁴ In light of the fact that this work attempts to study multiple instances where Owen has done just that, it is important to remember that he was often swimming against the tide, not just in what he came to believe, but in that he had not always believed it.

Owen’s response to Cawdrey addresses many of these rhetorical nuances head-on. He not only readily acknowledges that a change in his ecclesiology had taken place, but embraces the implications of a change in position. Cawdrey’s aim was to shame Owen into a confession of theological change,²⁵ but Owen reverses the tables: “he that can glory that in fourteen years he hath not altered or improved in his conception of some things of no greater importance than that mentioned shall not have me for his rival ....”²⁶ He insists that this has been a change not “from truth to errour,” as Cawdrey alleged, but “from error to truth;” and any change he has made has always gone in that direction!²⁷

Owen’s further explanation of his ecclesiastical shift simultaneously sheds light on and raises questions about his ecclesiology before this conversion to Congregationalism — a point to which we next turn.


²⁵ Cawdrey, Independencie a Great Schism, pp. 218.


²⁷ A Vindication, in Works, 13:222.
III. Identifying Owen’s Earliest Ecclesiology

In the course of Owen’s exchange with Daniel Cawdrey a number of questions arise about Owen’s ecclesiological starting point. Regarding his earlier work in question, *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* (1643), Owen admits that it was written when he professed “to be of the Presbyterian judgment.” He was “then a young man ... about the age of twenty-six or twenty-seven” and the “controversy between Independency and Presbytery was young also.” He acknowledges that, at that time it was a debate that he himself had not yet “clearly understood, especially as stated on the congregational side.” However, Owen also suggests that it is a rather moot point as it pertains to the work of *Pastors and People* itself, since the “conceptions delivered in the treatise were not ... suited to the opinion of the one party or the other ....” Going further, he insists, “I found that my principles [in *Pastors and People*] were far more suited to what is the judgment and practice of the congregational men than those of the Presbyterian.” And further still: “when I compare what then I wrote with my present judgment I am scarce able to find the least difference between the one and the other ....” These are rather significant claims. The secondary literature on Owen has not-infrequently quoted these and other similar lines, but they have been variously interpreted. Most have simply taken Owen’s claim that there is a neutrality of ecclesiastical-polity in *Pastors and People* at face value. Some have concluded that the early work is “perfectly consistent” with Owen’s full-bloom Congregationalism. So is Owen’s 1643-ecclesiology an incipient Congregationalism, an unconscious Congregationalism, or simply Presbyterianism? As shall be shown further, this matter is not a


29 A Vindication, in Works, 13:222.


33 Cook, “A Political Biography of ... John Owen,” p. 54.
simple one. Previous analyses of Owen’s ecclesiology, it would seem, have lacked the patience to deal with all of the data and, thus, have often come to hasty and inaccurate conclusions. Therefore, a thorough examination of Owen’s earliest ecclesiology will occupy the next several pages.

Owen expressly states in the Preface of Pastors and People that he is attempting to carve a path between “democratical confusion” and “hierarchical tyranny.” Further in this Preface, he is more specific about what he means by this middle path, explaining that the “assertions” of the work “are of that kind ... which are commonly called presbyterial or synodical, in opposition to prelatical or diocesan on one side, and that which is commonly called independent or congregational on the other.” In other words, in this work, Owen clearly sees Presbyterianism as that judicious middle path.

Likewise, there are many ways in which this stated Presbyterianism is demonstrated in Pastors and People. As was briefly noted in the previous chapter, much of this little work deals with ordination and whether “extraordinary callings” are ever legitimate. It is only the most extraordinary of circumstances that a non-synodical ordination could be acceptable. In the “ordinary cases,” Owen argues, “two things are required:” ... “Gifts from God” and “Authority from the church.” Within the context, it is clear that Owen’s usage of “the church” here does not mean a visible local congregation (i.e., “church” in the Congregationalists’ reckoning). Almost every instance of the word “church” in Pastors and People refers to either the “universal” or the “catholic-visible” categories of church. Related is the issue of the power of the “keys of the kingdom” (referring to Matt. 16:19) and to whom they were given. In Pastors and People Owen believes

---

34 Pastors and People, in Works, 13:5.
36 These extraordinary circumstances being: 1) immediate divine revelation, 2) when under an apostate national church, or 3) being shipwrecked to a “barbarous people” (Works, 13:29-38).
37 Pastors and People, in Works, 13:43.
Admittedly, this is getting slightly ahead of ourselves. Later in this chapter we shall return to these concepts of the nature of the church (“visible-local” and “catholic-visible”) and the authority of the church (whether the “keys” are given to the people or to pastors). These categories will then be defined. For now it is sufficient to note simply that, in his earliest ecclesiological work, Owen’s convictions on these two touchstone ecclesiological issues follow the general Presbyterian lines of interpretation. This would seem to add credence to the assessment that Owen was a rather card-carrying Presbyterian when he wrote Pastors and People. And if this is accurate, it raises a question about the legitimacy of his claim to Cawdrey that his earlier work was not “suited to the opinion of the one party or the other.”

That said, there are some sections of the work which show at least some sympathies with aspects of the Congregational way. These would seem to either foreshadow his later shift to Congregationalism or suggest that he had an incipient Congregationalism in 1643 (even if he was mistaken about the name or label of his beliefs). As the full title indicates — The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished — part of the work addresses the duty of the members of the church. Owen’s aim here is two-fold: 1) to differentiate between the gifts and responsibilities of pastors and people (and in this sense to set a limit on the people’s role); and 2) to ascribe a greater breadth and depth of responsibility to the people, which is “for their own and others’ edification” (and in this sense to elevate their role).39

Beginning with a NT study of terminology, Owen rather gently suggests that the Greek words generally translated as “ministers” refer more generally to Christians.40 Similarly, all “true Christians [may] be called priests.”41 By virtue of union with

Reformed and Reforming

Christ, all Christians are not only allotted this priestly place of privilege, but also have an interest in its “performance.”42 Further, the Holy Spirit is given to the Christian to “worketh in” what has already been done by Christ. This divine work results in a “holy unction, whereby we are anointed to the participation of all Christ’s glorious offices.”43 So then, this priestly, sacrificial, Christ-like, and Spirit-empowered unction is to be manifested in the peoples’ “prayers and thanksgiving,”44 “preaching the gospel to the conversion of souls,”45 a “diligent searching of the Scriptures,”46 and a “trying” of the public teaching, according to the Scriptures.47 Not surprisingly, Owen cites the example of the noble Bereans in Acts 17 for their scriptural searching and testing.

Returning to the theme of Spirit-given unction, Owen concludes that this ought to include scriptural “urging” from even “a simple layman.”48 Such a ministry, in scriptural terms, means that the body would:

- warn the unruly, ...
- comfort the feeble-minded, ...
- support the weak, ...
- admonish and reprove offending brethren, ...
- instruct the ignorant, ...
- exhort the negligent, ...
- comfort the afflicted, ...
- visit the sick, ...
- reconcile those that are at variance, ...
- contend for the faith, ...
- edify one another, ...
- speak to themselves in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, ...
- mark them that make divisions ....49

---

45 Owen explains: “these sacrifices are appropriated to the ministers of the gospel, not in regard of the matter — for others also may convert souls unto God, and offer up prayers and praises in the name of their companions” (Pastors and People, in Works, 13:25).
47 Pastors and People, in Works, 13: 40.
48 Pastors and People, in Works, 13:42. It is perhaps this comment that requires Owen to later qualify that he does not support what some call “the liberty of prophesying” (Works, 13:48).
In sum: “the people of God are allowed all quiet and peaceable means, whereby they may help each other forward in the knowledge of godliness and the way towards heaven.”

This argument for a vibrant, horizontal, one-another, member-ministry of the church complicates the picture of Owen’s earlier ecclesiology, since it is much more consistent with the Congregationalists’ view than with almost any other example of English Presbyterianism of the mid-seventeenth century.

All of this begins to demonstrate some of the complexity of the matter of Owen’s shift in ecclesiology. His retort to Cawdrey in 1657 — that he is “scarce able to find the least difference between” his current views and what he wrote in his 1643 work — seems accurate when only one side of the coin of Pastors and People is considered, and yet inaccurate when the other side of the coin is acknowledged. In other words, Owen’s earliest ecclesiological work has sections which identify with Presbyterianism and other sections which have a Congregationalist flavor to them.

Further complicating matters is that Owen’s insistence to Cawdrey that there is no difference between his present Congregational views (in 1657) and what he wrote in 1643 is not limited to one or two sentences; there are a dozen or so scattered throughout his Vindication. It seems that an important key to understanding these statements, however, is to notice the unhelpfully extreme language from Cawdrey which solicits Owen’s emphatic claims of consistency. For instance, Owen’s earlier position is sometimes termed as “episcopal” by Cawdrey. Such a misstep precipitates Owen’s insistence on the consistency of his ecclesiology, by which he means that he has always been in “opposition to Episcopacy and ceremonies.” His nonconformity

50 Pastors and People, in Works, 13:47.

51 This practice, sometimes referred to as “conferencing,” was not unheard of among Presbyterians, but Nuttall was correct to see it as a staple among Congregationalists (Visible Saints, pp. 70-100). While not explicitly stated, this is also demonstrated in the recent work by Francis J. Bremer, Lay Empowerment and the Development of Puritanism (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).


to these matters is in his blood. Also, Cawdrey regularly equates Independents with Donatists, Anabaptists, and Brownists. Thus, not surprisingly, he also misunderstands Owen’s current (1657) view of a church-state. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Owen was very much in favor of a godly, uncoercive, effective church settlement with some sort of system for the approbation of and maintenance to ministers. This is no small part of Owen’s insistence (arguably an over-insistence at times) that his view has not changed since writing Pastors and People. In each context, however, it is clear that he is insisting that a certain aspect of his ecclesiology has not changed; not that no part of his ecclesiology has changed.

Also noteworthy is that Owen’s responses to Cawdrey somewhat downplay differences between Presbyterianism and Congregationalism, as well as between his earlier and later ecclesiologies, for strategic reasons. As was demonstrated already in our study, throughout the mid-1650s, Owen had been working diligently toward the “uniting the godly” within a Protestant church settlement. As we shall see in this chapter, Owen had strong and growing convictions about the rightness of the Congregational way, but his goal was never “separatism.” His goal was a Reformed, ecumenical, and godly kingdom. To that end, he had been working with Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists on multiple constitutional-confessional proposals. Differences between these parties were not insignificant, but, according to the Savoy Preface, they were differences between “fellow servants ..., neither having authority ... to impose their opinions [on] the other.”

Therefore, what must be concluded is that in 1643 Owen is, in a sense, passionate for varying elements of each party – even if he did not fully realize it. On the one hand, his elevation of the member-ministry of the church is more consistent with his later...

---

54 Owen writes: “I was bred up from my infancy under the care of my father, who was a Nonconformist all his days, and a painful laborer in the vineyard of the Lord” (Works, 12:224).
56 Preface, Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, p. xxix.
eclesiology than with almost any other example of Presbyterianism of the mid-seventeenth century. It is in this sense that his “principles” (those every-member principles in Pastors and People) “were far more suited to what is the judgment and practice of the congregational men than those of the Presbyterian.”57 “I cannot ... deny,” Owen attests, “it was possible I was advantaged in the disquisition of the truth I had in hand from my former embracing of the principles laid down in the treatise.”58

On the other hand, the more structural elements of ecclesiology in Pastors and People demonstrate that Owen was a rather typical Presbyterian when he wrote it. His views of the visible-catholic church, the “keys” of the kingdom given to the “office,” and synodical ordination all reveal that Pastors and People is, in fact, “suited” to that structure. Or, put another way, it is not simply that he disagrees with a caricature of Congregationalism (as “democratical confusion”) in 1643; though that is true, he also disagrees with key elements of legitimate Congregationalism — the kind he would later come to embrace.59 Owen’s position in 1643 is rightly termed Presbyterian, and it is correct to speak of his eventual conversion to Congregationalism. He is plain and bold about this change in his second response to Cawdrey:

Be it here, then, declared, that whereas I some time apprehended the presbyterial, synodical government of churches to have been fit to be received and walked in (then when I knew not but that it answered those principles which I had taken up, upon my best inquiry into the word of God), I now profess myself to be satisfied that I was then under a mistake, and that I do now own, and have for many years lived in, the way and practice of that called congregational.60

Now having identified Owen’s ecclesiological starting point (Presbyterianism), and having observed that Owen’s every-member “principles” were already sympathetic to parts of Congrega-

59 Contra Cook, “A Political Biography of ... John Owen,” p. 54.
60 An Answer to a Late Treatise of Mr Cawdrey (1658), in Works, 13:292.
tionalism, we turn to the central influence of Cotton’s *Keyes of the Kingdom* on Owen’s evaluation of and transition to Congregationalism.

IV. The Influence of Cotton’s *Keyes*

This chapter’s narrow focus on particulars in Owen’s ecclesiology prohibits us from entering the choppy historiographical waters regarding the origins of non-separatist Congregationalism. Similarly, the degree of Cotton’s ecclesiological influence upon other individuals, especially the Dissenting Brethren of the Westminster Assembly, is an important and variously understood matter, but it is not central to this chapter. For our purposes it suffices to note more generally

---


62 In the words of John Wilson, Cotton was considered the “soul-brother to the English Independents.” See *Pulpit in Parliament: Puritanism During the English Civil Wars, 1640-1648* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 225. Some scholars have suggested that Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye were convinced of nonconformity and/or Congregationalism by Cotton in a 1631 meeting that Goodwin, Nye, and others set up to convince Cotton of the waywardness of his recent nonconformity. See Francis Bremer, “Cotton, John (1585-1652),” *ODNB*. The most thorough study of the role of Cotton’s *Keyes* for the ecclesiological debates of
that, though he was not its only spokesman, Cotton’s work was particularly influential on the growing articulation of Congregationalism in the 1640s. As such, it is possible to make too much of Owen’s comment about the influence of Cotton’s Keyes on his ecclesiology. And yet, Owen insists that Cotton’s Keyes was uniquely persuasive for his move to Congregationalism, and he does so in more than one place. He also took up Cotton’s defense after the latter’s death. This is all rather unique since a search of the Works reveals that Owen never mentions any other Congregational authors — not Henry Jacob, Cotton Mather, Timothy Dwight, Henry Burton, Jeremiah Burroughs, Thomas Goodwin, or Philip Nye. As a group, the Dissenting Brethren

63 Other important Congregational writings of the 1640s include: Cotton’s The True Constitution of a Particular Visible Church (1642), The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England (1645), The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared (1648); the work of the “Dissenting Brethren” in The Petition for the Prelates Briefly Examined (1641), An Apologetical Narration (1643), A Copy of the Remonstrance Lately Delivered to into the Assembly (1645), and The Reasons Presented by the Dissenting Brethren against ... Presbyterian Government (1648); Jeremiah Burroughes, Irenicum (1646); Thomas Hooker, A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline (1648); Richard Byfield, Temple Defilers Defiled, Therein a True Visible Church of Christ is Described (1645); Henry Burton, A Vindication of Churches Commonly Called Independent (1644); William Bartlet, A Model of the Primitive Congregational Way (1647). Also important is the 11-page preface to Cotton’s Keyes written by Goodwin and Nye for its 1644 London publication.

64 See also An Answer to a Late Treatise of Mr Cawdrey, in Works, 13:293.

65 Cotton committed to Owen an unpublished manuscript (a reply to Cawdrey’s recent printed complaints of Cotton’s work). Owen saw to the publishing of Cotton’s work and added a 100-page preface of his own: A Defence of Mr. John Cotton (1658).

66 Some scholars have suggested that Henry Jacob (1563-1624) as the primary influence on English Congregationalism’s beginnings: e.g., Ha, English Presbyterianism, pp. 67, 103; Coffey, Politics, Religion, and the British Revolutions, p. 203. Some have even argued for Jacob’s formative influence on Owen: e.g., Brown, “Occasional Conformity: The Congregationalism of Henry Jacob and John Owen,” pp. 87-106. Brown saw shared ecclesiological tenets between Jacob and Owen as proof of Owen’s dependance on Jacob. But such tenets were shared by other non-separating Congregationalists. It is much more preferable to heed Owen’s explicit word on Cotton’s influence than to dismiss it (p. 100). The case against Jacob as the source for later Congregationalists is made by Powell, “The Dissenting Brethren,” pp. 11-14, 253-54.
Reformed and Reforming

are only briefly referred to in a couple of places; in one such case it is even somewhat negative as Owen bemoans that the writings which came from both sides of the “Grand Debate” were too “prolix” to be useful. Thomas Hooker is mentioned once, but only as an example of someone with whom he disagrees. In light of this, Owen’s multiple and repeated glowing remarks about Cotton and his ecclesiology stand out rather starkly in the Works.

A. The Key of “the Keys”

As the title indicates, Cotton’s work seeks to untie the Gordian knot of the recipients of and the extent of the power of the “keys of the kingdom,” referring to Christ’s words to Peter in Matt. 16:19: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (ESV). This had become a central battleground for debates about church government in mid-seventeenth century England. Indeed, recent research by Hunter Powell has demonstrated that the matter of the “keys” occupied the main part of the Assembly’s discussion and writing in October 1643. All sides agreed that Christ gave the “keys” to Peter in Matt. 16. The point of contention question was over what Peter represented. Did Peter simply represent Peter, as Rome alleged? Or did Peter represent all of the Apostles and by extension future ministers? According to Powell it “was a central tenet of some English presbyterians that [quoting Samuel Rutherford] ‘the

67 An Answer to Dr. Stillingfleet’s Book of the Unreasonableness of Separation (1681), in Works 15:429, 432.
69 An Inquiry into ... Evangelical Churches, in Works, 13:248.
70 Hunter Powell, “October 1643: The Dissenting Brethren and the Proton Dektikon,” in Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Reformed Puritanism, Haykin and Jones, eds., pp. 52-82. By benefiting from Van Dixhoorn’s recovery of missing parts of John Lightfoot’s Assembly journal, Powell has painted a very different picture of the “Grand Debate” than the previous scholarship on the Assembly which has often vilified the “Dissenting Brethren.” For a fuller analysis of this issue, see the author’s PhD dissertation: “The Dissenting Brethren and the Power of the Keys.”
proper subject wherein Christ hath seated and entrusted all Church-power, and the exercise thereof, in only his own Church-officers.\textsuperscript{71} The Dissenting Brethren, on the other hand, argued that Peter represented the church. The “keys” were given to Peter “considered as a believer, having made his confession of faith, that Christ was the Son of God and therefore representing the Church of Believers, as unto whom all Church power should be first given.”\textsuperscript{72} As such, they meant that the “keys” had been given to the church “not as an Institution Political … [but] representing both Saints and Minister, to be divided into several bodies” or particular assemblies.\textsuperscript{73}

About the same time that this debate rumbled on in the Assembly, Owen was writing Pastors and People (1643). As we have already seen, in that work he believes that “the power of keys” had been given to “the office” — i.e., to ministers and/or synods, but not the “people.” In doing this, he was siding with the position of the majority of the English Presbyterians in the Assembly. It was a matter only briefly touched upon in Owen’s earliest ecclesiological work, but it was very much the centerpiece of the October debate in the Assembly. Not coincidentally, it was also the centerpiece of Cotton’s argument in Keyes. As we shall see later in this chapter, it is a matter to which Owen would often return in his later ecclesiological works.

Therefore, a quick overview of the salient points of The Keyes of the Kingdom will help to explain its main theses — presumably, the arguments which convinced Owen. This will also set up our later examination of these ecclesiological principles in Owen’s later Congregational writings.


\textsuperscript{73} Powell, “October 1643,” p. 68, quoting Goodwin, Constitution, Right Order, and Government, p. 44.
B. Summarizing Cotton’s Keyes

Cotton, like the Dissenting Brethren at the Assembly, insists that “the key is given to the Brethren of the Church.”\(^{74}\) Having the “power” of the “keys” means that the church assembly as a whole “hath the power, privileges and liberties ...”

- to “choose their Officers;”
- to “send forth one or more their Elders” for “the publick service of Christ;”
- to refuse those unfit “to be admitted unto their communion” and its “seals;”
- and to “joyn with the Elders, in inquiring, hearing, [and] judging publick scandals,” so as to either “censure” or “forgive the repentant.”\(^{75}\)

Cotton acknowledges that excommunication, because it is one of the “highest acts of Rule,” cannot happen “but by some Rulers.” The “brethren,” therefore, cannot exercise this power of the “keys” without the elders. But neither can the elders exercise discipline single-handedly, if for no other reason than they must “tell it to the church.”\(^{76}\)

Like many other Congregationalists of the seventeenth century, Cotton is not opposed to synods. The “Church hath liberty in case of dissension amongst themselves to resort to a Synod.”\(^{77}\) Similarly, each particular church has the “Liberty of communion with other churches.” Individuals of one church may occasionally come to another church for “participation.” These churches in communion should share communication between themselves, especially for the movement of members between churches, but also for consultation and “receiving mutual supplies

\(^{74}\) Cotton, *Keyes of the Kingdom*, p. 12.


\(^{76}\) Cotton, *Keyes of the Kingdom*, p. 16.

\(^{77}\) Cotton, *Keyes of the Kingdom*, pp. 16-17.
and succours from one another.”⁷⁸ This communion between churches may also involve the consideration of “propagation and multiplication of Churches,” such as the division of a large church into two churches or the merging of two smaller neighboring assemblies into one.⁷⁹

One section of Cotton’s work argues that there is an aspect of the “keys” which is uniquely committed to the elders of a particular church. The “key” of power, according to Cotton, was given to the people, but the “key” of authority belonged to elders. The latter mostly relates to the calling of and specific details for the public assemblies of the church.⁸⁰ But what should be noted here is the uniqueness of Cotton’s position among his Congregationalist brethren. While practically all Congregationalists believed in the unique leadership of pastors and elders within the body, many of them did not arrive at it through Cotton’s view of portioning a part of the “keys” to the elders.

Another section of the Keyes is devoted to the power and authority of synods. Here he insists that the elders’ collective authority in a synod is derivative, given and assigned by each representative congregation. But, according to Cotton, this does not mean that elders “assembled in a Synod, have no authority to determine or conclude any act that shall bind the churches, but [only] according to the instructions which before they have received from the churches.”⁸¹ Simultaneously he qualifies that no synod has the power to “injoyn” things “indifferent” to their churches — only those things which are according to the “Truth and Peace of the Gospel.”⁸² In the adiaphora matters of “worship” and “order,” synods have not “any such power”⁸³ since “Christ never provided uniformity, but onely for unity.”⁸⁴

---

⁷⁸ Cotton, Keyes of the Kingdom, p. 18.
⁷⁹ Cotton, Keyes of the Kingdom, p. 19.
⁸⁰ Cotton, Keyes of the Kingdom, pp. 20-23.
⁸¹ Cotton, Keyes of the Kingdom, p. 26.
⁸² Cotton, Keyes of the Kingdom, pp. 26-27.
⁸³ Cotton, Keyes of the Kingdom, p. 27.
⁸⁴ Cotton, Keyes of the Kingdom, p. 28 (emphasis his).
Also important to the parameters of the synod’s authority is whether it has “the power of Ordination and Excommunication.” This is the real fork in the road between Congregationalist and Presbyterian ecclesiologies. Cotton is judicious in approaching this matter, undoubtedly fearful that the Congregationalists’ position would be too easily lumped together with the raw forms of “independency” and “separatism.” Nevertheless, he acknowledges that a synodical decision on someone’s ordination or excommunication is a matter that would not be taken up “hastily” by a synod. A synod may choose to “determine, and to publish and declare” a “determination” on such matters, but “the administration of” any determinations would be left “to the Presbytery of the several churches.”

The language may be confusing to over-denominationalizing eyes, but contextually it is clear that Cotton is not speaking of a synodical presbytery, but of the eldership within particular churches. In other words, only reluctantly would a Congregationalist synod involve itself in a matter of ordination or excommunication. And, if and where this would happen, their “determination” would simply be “published.” The exercise of any determination would be left to the leadership of particular assemblies since the authority of synods is derivative.

This is a quick summary of the sections of the Keyes which likely would have been important in Owen’s move to Congregationalism. As we shall see, many of the same themes resurface in Owen’s later ecclesiology. The next step in our study, however, is to move chronologically, to explore the first signs of Owen’s Congregationalism at work and in practice.

---

85 Cotton, Keyes of the Kingdom, p. 28.
86 Cotton, Keyes of the Kingdom, p. 28.
87 Goodwin’s language is that “occasional synods” have “subordinate” power. His treatment of synods in Constitution, Right Order, and Government (Book 5, pp. 197-239) is much more thorough than the Keyes, and his view is slightly more limiting on the role of the synods than Cotton’s. Goodwin and Nye, in their preface to Cotton’s Keyes of the Kingdom, state their disagreement with Cotton’s use of Acts 15 and Jerusalem Council for the basis of synods (no pagination). A similar approach to synods can found as early as the 1629 edition of William Ames’ Medulla Theologiae, chap. 39.27.
V. The Earliest Signs of Owen’s Congregationalism

While Owen gives a thorough, personal account of his ecclesiological testing and transformation, he does not specify the precise year for this change, only that it was “not long after” after the publication of *Pastors and People* (late 1643) that he began to seriously examine the matter. At the time of the work’s publication he was in hold of the living at Fordham, a village in Essex.\(^{88}\) John Alsop had been the rector since 1633, but, as the former chaplain of the soon-to-be-executed Archbishop Laud, he had deserted his church and fled. This provided the opening to which Owen was appointed in Fordham. It was no easy pastoral assignment with a Laudian (Arminian, high-church) predecessor who had abandoned the church just prior to his arrival. Owen’s ministry at Fordham had all the marks of a faithful evangelical, Puritan ministry.\(^{89}\) However, it had no distinguishing characteristics of Congregational ecclesiology (other than, presumably, those “principles” previously noted in *Pastors and People*).

In 1646, a number of developments brought Owen’s evolving ecclesiology into clearer focus. Early in April, he was nominated to preach a fast-day sermon to the Long Parliament, and on April 29 he did just that.\(^{90}\) His message, *A Vision of Unchangeable Free Mercy*, has eschatologically-hopeful overtones scattered throughout.\(^{91}\) The growing expanse of God’s kingdom, for Owen, means that

---


89 John Asty tells that his earnest preaching ministry was well-regarded, and attracted people from other parishes. See “Memoirs of the Life of John Owen, D.D.” in *A Complete Collection of the Sermons of John Owen* (London, 1721), p. vi. Owen also went house-to-house in Fordham ministering through the use of two catechisms that he wrote — one for adults, another for children. These were published soon after as: *Two Short Catechisms* (1645), in *Works*, 1:463ff.


England’s blessings are to be used for others, especially by “sending the gospel to” other nations, places, and people. But reformation must also continue at home, Owen insists, specifically for the “worship of God.” Owen optimistically predicts, “this reformation of England shall be more glorious than of any nation in the world, being carried on neither by might nor power, but only by the Spirit of the Lord ....”

These rather bold appeals from the 30-year-old Owen seem to have been well received by the Commons, who called for the sermon’s immediate printing. However, Owen noted afterward that, for some, the sermon raised many questions about his support (or lack thereof) of Parliament’s recent work at ecclesiastical reform. It also raised questions about his view of liberty, the magistrate, and church government. Thus, for the sermon’s publication, Owen attached two short clarifying documents: “A Short Defensive about Church Government, Toleration, and Petitions” and “A Country Essay for the Practice of Church Government.”

A. “A Country Essay for ... Church Government” (1646)

In the second of these documents, Owen avoids the terms Presbyterian and Independent, except only to state that such labels are reductionist. It would be, he protests, too “simple or malicious as to ask whether this way be that of the Presbyterians or Independents.” His greater concern in “Country Essay” is for unifying “the godly” in two ways: 1) toward a more “thorough reformation” of the church according to the “rules of

---

95 Journal of the House of Commons, 4:526.
The Keys of the Kingdom: The Church

Scripture;"\textsuperscript{100} 2) toward a broader comprehension of liberty for non-fundamental matters.\textsuperscript{101} Curiously, it is the latter which receives lengthier attention. His nine “assertations” and two “cautions” on liberty and toleration are generally consistent with the summary of his views that were observed in the previous chapter of this work. However, there is a uniquely defensive tone in “Country Essay,” which is actually more commensurate with Owen’s post-Restoration writings on toleration. While toleration should not extend to heretics, especially to those who disturb the peace of the state and church, he simultaneously discourages severity of punishment for them;\textsuperscript{102} he contemplates the difficulty of defining heresy, fundamentals, and matters indifferent;\textsuperscript{103} he wonders aloud whether the punishment for heresy has ever been effective in limiting heresy and furthering truth;\textsuperscript{104} and he strongly discourages any kind of “severity,” especially for the inevitable differences between those who hold to what is “commonly so esteemed in the reformed churches.”\textsuperscript{105} It is clear from the preface, that the possibility of a soon-coming Presbyterian uniformity is a concern for Owen as he writes in 1646.\textsuperscript{106}

As to Owen’s proposal for church government in “Country Essay,” he explains that the “practice of the apostolic churches” has been the focus of his recent study, and therein he has observed a “pattern” and “rules” for their “constitution.”\textsuperscript{107} His following proposal then “seems to me, as like one of them as any thing yet I have seen.”\textsuperscript{108} It is not inappropriate to call this a proposal, for that is exactly what Owen intends. As he states in

\textsuperscript{100} “Short Defensive,” in Works, 8:48.

\textsuperscript{101} See “Country Essay,” in Works, 8:52-69.

\textsuperscript{102} “Country Essay,” in Works, 8:59-66.

\textsuperscript{103} “Country Essay,” in Works, 8:60.

\textsuperscript{104} Owen writes: “heresy is a canker, but a spiritual one, let it be prevented by spiritual means. Cutting off men’s heads is no remedy for it” (“Country Essay,” in Works, 8:64).

\textsuperscript{105} “Country Essay,” in Works, 8:63.

\textsuperscript{106} Put bluntly: “Once more conformity is grown the touchstone ... amongst the greater part of men” (“Short Defensive,” in Works, 8:43); see also Works, 8:48.

\textsuperscript{107} “Short Defensive,” in Works, 8:48.

\textsuperscript{108} “Short Defensive,” in Works, 8:48.
the preface: “I shall now set down and make public that proposal ... as a means to give some light into a way for the profitable and comfortable practice of church government.” He bemoans the unsuccessful sectarian debates on church government that have occupied his nation in recent days, and he clearly believes that the lines between “the two great parties” is not nearly so disparate “that one kingdom, communion, [and] heaven cannot hold us.” However, Owen also argues that “our covenant” (referring to the Solemn League and Covenant) did not “tie us up so absolutely to any one formerly known way of church discipline.” So insisting on a still-possible accommodation between the “two great parties,” he courageously (if not presumptuously) suggests that “the following lines” of the “Country Essay” are intended “to sedate and bury such contests.” As Toon rightfully concluded, it was a “rather audacious move” for “a young, little-known preacher” to offer so publically and succinctly a sketch of a church settlement that might unite Presbyterians and Independents. And this coming from one outside of the Westminster Assembly while the Assembly was still in the thick of its ecclesiological debates!

109 “Short Defensive,” in Works, 8:47.
110 “Short Defensive,” in Works, 8:45.
111 “Short Defensive,” in Works, 8:46. The Solemn League and Covenant was enacted in England in 1643. Powell has demonstrated a rather surprising partnership between the Scots and the “Dissenting Brethren” at the Assembly. See “The Dissenting Brethren and the Power of the Keys,” chap. 1. Thus, Owen certainly was not alone in finding the Solemn League and Covenant to be workable framework for polities beyond strict-Presbyterianism.
112 “Short Defensive,” in Works, 8:45.
113 Toon, God’s Statesman, p. 23. It is worth considering whether a similar kind of political-proactiveness can also be seen in the closing lines of Owen’s Pastors and People. He ends the work by rather obscurely stating his agreement with the “whole church of Scotland” and “the act of their assembly at Edinburgh, anno 1641” (Pastors and People, in Works, 13:49). According to Powell, on Oct. 12, 1643 the House of Lords had urged the Westminster Assembly to settle on a platform of government in “agreement with the church of Scotland and the other reformed churches” (“October 1643,” pp. 52-82). It is possible that Pastors and People was written after Oct. 1643. If it was, and if Owen knew about the Lords’ language of “agreement with Scotland and other reformed churches” then his concluding comments in Pastors and People may not only indicate that he closely followed the ups and downs of the Assembly, but also that he sought to insert himself within their discussion and debates – at least as much as an outsider could. It is a rather odd ending to the work otherwise.
As for the specifics of this ecclesiastical proposal in “Country Essay,” they are confined to only a few short pages. Not unlike Owen’s first work of ecclesiology, here we find elements of both Congregationalism and Presbyterianism.

- Parish precincts should continue, with each minister entrusted a public ministry – “house to house ... warning all” and “waiting with all patience on them that oppose themselves [to] the gospel.”
- Ministers and elders should be “acknowledged” and “approved” by the congregation as officers for the teaching and ruling of the church.
- Elders from each church should make up “classes” which should exercise “all authority that such classes are intrusted with.”
- If “any officers be added to them,” they should “be chosen by the consent of the multitude” of the congregation.
- As for the particular congregations, they should be made up of a “gathering of professors” who “by their own desire and voluntary consent” unite themselves into “one body.”
- Any who are desirous to be admitted into fellowship and are “thought fit” should be received. And none shall “be excluded who have the least breathings of ... sincerity after Jesus Christ.”
- Anyone “so assembling” should have the “liberty” to “except [or bring a complaint] against another,” permitting it is done with “meekness.”
- Excommunication is to be done by the “joint consent” of the Congregation – of course only after “repeated admonition,” hinting at Matt. 18:15-17.

It is unclear from this proposal how to understand Owen at this stage of his life. Was he a Congregationalist or a Presbyterian? Was his ecclesiological move from Presbyterianism to Congrega-

---

Was “Country Essay” completely neutral or unspecific in its polity? Or does this proposal represent a more pragmatically compromising vision to “unite the godly,” in which Congregationalists and Presbyterians would both make concessions and meet somewhere in the middle? Answers to these questions are not explicit, but they are not impossible to postulate.

We can observe in the above points that Owen’s ecclesiological convictions in the “Country Essay” are certainly more consistent with Congregationalism than what he wrote three years previous in *Pastors and People*. His views of a visible gathering of believers and congregational involvement for appointing elders, adding members, and exercising discipline all fit rather neatly under the Congregationalist rubric. Some of the most hotly-burning theological and practical questions of his day remain unanswered in the work, such as the recipients of the “keys” or the precise relationship between synods and churches. But by implication the question of the “keys” is basically answered by the responsibilities Owen assigns to the congregation. And, as we have seen, the mere use of synods did not divide neatly between party lines. *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order* maintained the use of (non-binding) synods — indeed, the Assembly was itself a prime example of an “occasional synod.” Therefore, the vagueness about synodical power in “Country Essay” is likely only strategic. More than illuminating Owen’s precise ecclesiological ideals, this is a unifying document aiming at national comprehension (a united Protestant church-state).

The proposal from the young Puritan may not have been given any serious and official consideration in Owen’s day, but from a later vantage point we can see it as a foreshadow of his labors in the following decade toward a godly, uncoercive, and

---

116 So posits Greaves, “Owen, John” (1616-1683),” *ODNB*. Ferguson’s language is that Owen’s Congregationalist beliefs were “in embryo” at this time (*John Owen on the Christian Life*, p. 4).

117 According to Lee, Owen “was no doubt a Congregationalist by this time, [but] A Country Essay can hardly be categorized either as Presbyterian or as Congregational” (“John Owen’s Conceptions of Christian Unity and Schism,” p. 16).

118 *Savoy Declaration of ... Order*, Article 22.
essentially-Reformed church settlement. Therefore, connecting
dots from 1646 through the 1650s, we can observe a unifying
theme for the whole of Owen’s Revolutionary years — that is, a
strong, principled desire to “unite the godly.” Owen wished for a
Protestant unity which allowed for liberty in practical and non-
fundamental matters. In one sense, his convictions and ideals for
ecclesiological practice took a backseat to his pursuit of a
Reformed unity. This was a driving force in Owen’s early public
ministry; in fact, it was throughout all his years, as his powerful
statement in 1657 attests: “I would rather, much rather, spend all
my time in making up and healing the breaches and schisms that
are amongst Christians than one hour in justifying our
divisions.”

As to the precise location of Owen’s ecclesiology at the time
of writing his “Country Essay” we might best call this a tempered
Congregationalism. Whether, at this stage, it was tempered simply
for pragmatic, unifying reasons or out of pure personal conviction
is not yet clear. Owen’s actual pastoral practices at this time will
help clarify.

B. Ministry in Coggeshall, Essex (1646-49)

Around the same time as the aforementioned publications,
Owen had accepted the call to the parish ministry of St Peter’s in
Coggeshall, Essex. Obadiah Sedgwick — a well-known
Presbyterian Puritan minister and one of the first names suggested
for the Assembly at Westminster — was Owen’s predecessor.
Unlike his previous post, Owen found in Coggeshall a “sober,
religious, and discreet” church. Some 2,000 well-educated and
judicious people attended his preaching ministry, and a “very
fervent affection was cultivated between minister and people.”

---

120 Owen was not formally installed until Aug. 18, 1646, but he was likely
functionally filling the vacancy of St Peter’s as early as May of that year. See Davids,
Nonconformity in the County of Essex, p. 398.
According to numerous historians, Owen almost immediately gathered a “visible church” within the public parish ministry of St Peter’s. 123 This kind of “parochial congregationalism” would have likely meant that communion and discipline were limited to the gathered or visible church.124 This “true church” would have eventually sought to elect its own elders and deacons, practice biblical fellowship, and possibly allow for public exhortations from lay people. Such an arrangement of a true church within or alongside of a parish ministry was not an uncommon practice for non-separating Congregationalists in the 1640s and 1650s. Thus, this scheme does not necessarily indicate that Owen’s ecclesiology was still in “transition,” as some have suggested.125 It is safe to conclude that sometime before mid-1646, Owen was a convinced and practicing Congregationalist.

Owen’s direct influence in Essex stretched beyond his own pastoral ministry. In 1646, he began meeting other Puritan ministers in the area to discuss doctrine, ecclesiology, and the civil war which was drawing ever-closer to their county.126 One of the Essex ministers, Ralph Josselin, recorded in his diary a rough, shorthand account of one such discussion on church government. It is telling of Owen’s ever-firming ecclesiastical convictions by 1648:

… we had much discourse concerning falling into practice [of church government] and in the first place, seeing that elders are to be chosen, by whom shall it be done; the parliament proposeth by

123 Wood, Athenae Oxonienses (London, 1813), 2.2:737; Asty, “Memoirs,” p. vii; Ferguson, John Owen on the Christian Life, p. 6; Toon, God’s Statesman, p. 28; Cook, “Political Biography of … John Owen,” p. 64; Greaves, “Owen, John,” ODNB; Trueman, John Owen, p. 3. Unfortunately, none of these works cite any historical proof for this claim, and I have not personally been able to verify the veracity of this claim with primary sources. However, as we shall see, it is quite consistent with the timeline and trajectory of Owen’s embrace and exercise of Congregational principles. There is certainly no historical evidence to doubt it.


125 Greaves, “Owen, John,” ODNB.

126 For an account of the Essex ministers’ role in the civil war, see Cook, “Political Biography of … John Owen,” pp. 64-77.
the people that have taken the covenant: others, [such] as Mr Owen, conceived this too broad, & would have first a separation to be made in our parishes, and that by the minister, and those godly that joyn unto him, and then proceed to choosing [elders].

In simpler terms, Owen was arguing for a division between parish ministry and visible/gathered churches. The godly who volitionally join themselves to a gathered church would then identify their own elders.

Though this meeting at the home of Josselin was still five months before Parliament would enact the Assembly’s full Presbyterian proposal, all signs were pointing in that direction. Parliament’s “Ordinance” began with a section on how elders would be chosen. The Essex ministers, therefore, were not engaging in mere theoretical banter — this was central to the ecclesiological differences among the Puritan Reformed in 1648 Britain. Owen and his brethren may or may not have had access to a draft of the soon-to-be enacted “Ordinance,” but they had seen similar specifics in the “petitions” produced by Essex Presbyterians. (Owen was pressured to sign several petitions but always refused.) They were, of course, also quite familiar with the loose Presbyterian polity that England had owned since August 1645, though it had not fully implemented on the parish level. All this makes clear that Owen’s words to the Essex ministers were not recreational and theoretical idealism. It was a very real question how a new national settlement would be locally executed. His ecclesiastical ideals would not have significant national influence for another several years, but through the events of 1646-48 Owen’s own convictions were clear and consistent. And central among those convictions was the concept


128 “Ordinance for the Form of Church Government” (Aug. 29, 1648), in Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, pp. 1188-1215.

129 Such as the “Testimony of the Ministers of Essex.” See Toon, God’s Statesman, pp. 22-23.

130 See “Short Defensive,” in Works, 8:46-47.
of the gathered church — viz. visible saints covenanted together, choosing their own elders.

**C. Eschol; A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan (1648)**

While pastoring in Essex, Owen wrote another brief ecclesiological work. *Eschol* offered fifteen rules for saints “walking in fellowship” with each other and their pastors.\(^{131}\) It became widely-circulated among Congregationalists.\(^{132}\) The aims of the work were similar to the parts of *Pastors and People* on fellowship and “one-another” ministry. However, in the preface to *Eschol*, Owen uniquely explains what he assumes to be the “foundation” of these principles of fellowship. This four-fold foundation is worth quoting in full, emphasizing the words and phrases which distinctly demonstrate his Congregational underpinnings:

First, That particular congregations, or assemblies of believers, gathered into one body for a participation of the ordinances of Jesus Christ, under officers of their own, are of divine institution.

Secondly, That every faithful believer is bound, by virtue of positive precepts, to join himself to some such single congregation, having the notes and marks whereby a true church may be known and discerned.

Thirdly, That every man’s own voluntary consent and submission to the ordinances of Christ, in that church whereunto he is joined, is required for his union therewith and fellowship therein.

Fourthly, That it is convenient that all believers of one place should join themselves in one congregation, unless, through their being too numerous, they are by common consent distinguished into more ....\(^{133}\)

---

\(^{131}\) *Eschol; A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan* (1648), in *Works*, 13:51-87.

\(^{132}\) Nuttall tells that by 1700 the work was already in its fifth edition (*Visible Saints*, p. 54). See also Toon, ed., *The Correspondance of John Owen*, p. 21.

\(^{133}\) *Eschol; A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan*, in *Works*, 13:53 (emphasis added).
The Keys of the Kingdom: The Church

The repeated theme of a regenerate, volitional membership is one that can first be seen in his “Country Essay.” There, as we have seen, he writes of a “gathering of professors” who “by their own desire and voluntary consent” unite themselves into “one body.” This is a hallmark of Owen’s later ecclesiological writings, and a cornerstone to Congregational polity in general.\(^{134}\)

Throughout 1646-48 Owen’s ecclesiology was not in transition; by 1646 there was a mature Congregationalism which was rather consistently demonstrated in brief writings and ministerial efforts over the next few years. And yet, these same writings and efforts show that his Congregational ecclesiology was occasionally tempered, realistic, and pragmatic according to the ever-shifting ecclesiastical-political circumstances of England’s Revolution. His ecclesiological writings and labors in these years provide only a few literary snapshots over a dozen or so relevant pages. Sometimes these works emphasize the proper path for elder-appointment and other times emphasize the nature of the church or the constituency of its makeup. Though far from a full portrait of his ecclesiology, the tenets therein would seem to be perfectly consistent with his lengthier works of ecclesiology later in life. He was consistently eager to work towards a godly, Reformed settlement as well as even being flexibly open to remain, if necessary, within a loose form of Presbyterianism.\(^{135}\) And yet, in 1646-48, certain distinctly Congregational convictions kept him from joining certain Presbyterian petitions which would have required too much ecclesial uniformity and retained discipline to presbyteries rather than particular assemblies.\(^{136}\)

While Owen never addresses the matter of the “keys of the kingdom” in these early works, the effect of Cotton’s exegetical argument from Matt.16 is unmistakable on the young Congregationalist.

\(^{134}\) For more on this see Nuttall, Visible Saints, pp. 131ff.

\(^{135}\) As noted in the previous chapter, Owen spoke similarly when in 1681 he looked back at what might have been in the early 1660s: “Had the presbyterian government been settled at the king’s restoration … without a rigorous imposition of every thing” he would not have separated himself from it (An Answer to Dr Stillingfleet on the Unreasonableness of Separation, in Works, 15:433). See also his hopes for comprehension in 1657, An Answer to a Late Treatise of Mr Cawdrey, in Works, 13:377.

\(^{136}\) Toon, God’s Statesman, p. 23.
Before progressing further, another parenthetical word about terminology is now in order.

D. Congregational, not Independent

It should begin to be clear that the term “Independency” is a poor label for either the ecclesiological or political beliefs of Owen and other non-separatist Congregationalists. The *Apologetical Narration* (1643) is an early and prime example of the vehement protest of the term by those who much preferred to be called Congregationalists. They claimed, “That proud and insolent title of Independencie was affixed unto us ... [which is] a trumpet of defiance against what ever Power, Spirituall or Civill; which we abhor and detest.” Some historians have noted that the term “Independent” was often eschewed by Congregationalists, however, in most cases, these same historians have often used the word “Independent” as much as or more than “Congregational” to describe such figures.

The case of Owen is instructive to this historiographical issue of terms and taxonomy. In his writings, the term “Independency” (and other cognates) appears most in his exchanges with Cawdrey. There Owen uses the term simply because he has to; Cawdrey has affixed it to Owen and his beliefs. Thus, phrases like “... ‘Independency,’ as he [Cawdrey] is pleased to call it ...” are common in Owen’s writings on schism. The term is often in quotation marks. Only occasionally does Owen use it alongside

138 See Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, pp. 139-40, 161-63.
the preferred term, as in “independent or congregational.” But even in these cases it is clear that he is obliging the misunderstood term in order to clear up the caricature. The caricature of “Independentism” — and hence the reason that Owen and his kind resisted the term — is two fold: 1) the term encompasses too broad a spectrum of beliefs and practices, such as Quakers, Brownists, and Anabaptists; 2) the term implies separation from other neighboring churches, the Reformed movement, and/or the state in a way that did not represent the Congregationalists’ views and intentions. Even in his post-Restoration writings, Owen prefers the terms Congregationalism and nonconformity to “Independentism.” For these reasons historians would do well to abandon the term apart from its use in historical context. Even then, if it represents non-separating Congregationalists like Owen, the term should be set apart in quotation marks to signify its pejorative connotations. Other historical, somewhat denominating, terms — e.g., Presbyterian, Congregationalist, or even Puritan — were usually embraced by those who saw themselves falling within the general parameters of a particular label, but the same cannot be said of the term “Independent” as it was used of (not by) the majority of mainstream Congregationalists.

VI. Two Pillars of Owen’s Later Ecclesiology

Thus far we have limited the investigation of Owen’s ecclesiology to the years preceding 1650. This was necessary to mark out the transition of his ecclesiology as well as witness the telling and recurring themes during the years surrounding his

---

143 For more details on the problem with the term “Independency” see Halcomb, “Congregational Religious Practice,” pp. 7-10.
144 A simple search of an electronic version of Owen’s Works will demonstrate dozens of examples of his use of the term “Puritan.” It is certainly not his only description or perhaps even a preferred term for the movement of “further reformation” in England, but it is one that he is willing to accept and not shun.
move from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism. The majority of his ecclesiological works, and certainly the most significant and substantial ones, however, come in the second half of his life.\footnote{It may be useful to provide a thorough list of Owen’s post-1650 ecclesiologically-related works (chronologically): Of Schism (1657), in Works, 13:90-302; A Review of the True Nature of Schism, in Works, 13:208ff; An Answer to a Late Treatise of Mr Cawdrey (1658), in Works, 13:278ff; “The Glory and Interest of Nations: A Sermon” (1659), in Works, 8:454ff; Two Questions Concerning the Power of the Supreme Magistrate (1659), in Works, 13:508ff; A Discourse concerning Liturgies (1662), in Works, 15:2ff; Animadversions on ... Fiat Lux (1662) 14:2ff; Vindication of the Animadversions on Fiat Lux (1664), in Works, 14:174ff; Indulgence and Toleration Considered (1667), in Works, 13:518ff; A Peace-Offering, in an Apology and Humble Plea for Indulgence (1667), in Works, 13:542ff; A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God (1667), in Works, 15:446ff; A Word of Advice to the Citizens of London (1667), in Works, 13:576ff; Truth and Innocence Vindicated (1669), in Works, 13:343ff; An Account of the Grounds and Reasons on which Protestant Dissenters Desire Liberty (1670), in Works, 13:576ff; The Case of the Present Distresses on Nonconformists Examined (1670), in Works, 13:576ff; Reflections on a Slanderous Libel (1670), in Works, 16:270ff; Regarding the Present Bill Against Conventicles (1670), in Works, 13:576ff; A Discourse Concerning Evangelical Love, Church-Peace and Unity (1672), in Works, 15:58ff; The Church of Rome no Safe Guide (1679), in Works, 14:482ff; Some Considerations of Union among Protestants (1680), in Works, 14:518ff; A Brief Vindication of the Nonconformists from the Charge of Schism (1680), in Works, 13:304ff; An Inquiry into the Original, Nature ... and Communion of Evangelical Churches, in Works, 15:187ff; An Answer to Dr Stillingfleet on the Unreasonableness of Separation, in Works, 15:375ff; A Brief and Impartial Account of the Protestant Religion (1682), in Works, 14:530ff; The Chamber of Imagery in the Church of Rome Laid Open, in The Morning Exercises against Popery (1683); True Nature of the Gospel Church and its Government (1689), in Works, 16:2ff; “Seasonable Words for English Protestants: a Sermon” (1681), in Works, 9:2ff; The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer (1681), in Works, 4:236ff; A Guide to Church-Fellowship and Order (1692); On the Administration of Church Censures (N.D.), in Works, 16:223ff; A Letter concerning the Matter of the Present Excommunications (N.D.), in Works, 16:210ff.} Of course space will not permit an examination of these works and the numerous aspects of his Congregational ecclesiology — many of which still deserve serious exploration in future studies. But within our narrower purposes there is still some unfinished business pertaining to the broad categories of the nature and authority of the church. These have been hinted at throughout this chapter but without including the use of Owen’s later and more lengthy ecclesiological works. It is in these works that Owen more fully deals with the nature and authority of the church and provides fuller answers to the intertwined questions: Is the church catholic-visible or only visible? To whom are given the “keys of the
“The Keys of the Kingdom: The Church”

kingdom”? What are the boundaries of that power? What is the structural and authoritative relationship between elders and members?

A. The Nature of the Church: Catholic-Visible and/or Visible?

As to the nature and definition of the church, both Presbyterians and Congregationalists had a firm belief in the catholic or universal church — i.e., the redeemed elect of all times, whether on earth or in heaven. Most Presbyterians also agreed with the Congregationalists on a separate category for the particular, local church or parish. But the category of the catholic-visible church was a different matter. This became one of the key battlegrounds in the ecclesiological debates among seventeenth century English Puritans. The opinions about this catholic-visible category did not always fall neatly between Presbyterian and Congregationalist parties, for there were certainly more than two different opinions on the matter. Some Congregationalists, for instance, wholly denied the category. An example of this opinion can be seen in Isaac Chauncey’s preface to the posthumous publication of Owen’s *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*: “The Scripture speaks of no church as catholic visible,” claims Chauncey. “The thing itself is but a chimera of some men’s brains.” Cotton also rejected the idea in toto. For most Congregationalists, however, there was an acceptance of the

---

147 That said, it is interesting that the *Westminster Confession* treats the “visible church” and the “catholic or universal church” interchangeably in two paragraphs while mentioning the category of “particular churches” in a separate paragraph (see WCF, Ch. 25.2-4).

148 See Powell, “October 1643,” pp. 71-82, for an analysis of this matter in the Westminster Assembly. Powell argues that this was a uniquely British debate for Reformed ecclesiology.

149 This is demonstrated well in Powell, “October 1643,” pp. 71-79.

150 *Works*, 16:4. Several other similarly-rhetorical comments are made by Chauncey in the surrounding pages. See *Works*, 16:3-5.

category of the catholic-visible church, but a rejection of any structural/political authority attached to it.  

Owen’s position is consistent from his first real treatment of the matter in 1657 and throughout the rest of his life. Like the majority of his Congregationalist brethren Owen defined the catholic-visible category as the church on earth “in its outward profession ... whereunto they all belong who profess ... Christ;” it is “comprehensive of all who throughout the world outwardly own the gospel.” Like others, Owen is also adamant that because it is a universal category, rather than particular, it does not have “any law or rule of order and government, as such, given unto it;” it is impossible “to put any such law or rule into execution.” In fact, there is no “homogeneous ruler or rulers, that have the care of the administration of the rule and government of the whole, as such, committed to him or them by Jesus Christ.”

Or, put another way, no “ordinary church-officer” (no doubt distinguishing from the inordinate case of the Apostles) is intended to relate to “more churches ... or any other church, than a single particular congregation.” The “visible church” instituted by Christ in the NT

... consists in an especial society or congregation of professed believers, joined together according unto his mind, with their officers, guides, or rulers, whom he hath appointed, which do or may meet together for the celebration of all the ordinances of divine worship, the professing and authoritatively

---

152 Thus, The Savoy Declaration of Faith addresses the category as such: “The whole body of men throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel and obedience unto God by Christ according to it ... are, and may be called the visible catholic church of Christ; although as such it is not entrusted with the administration of any ordinances, or have any officers to rule or govern in, or over the whole body” (chap. 26.2).

153 It was not the position stated by Chauncey’s in the preface to Owen’s work. In other words, Chauncey either misunderstood or disagreed with Owen’s position. For Owen’s approval of the category, see Works, 13:156, 160, 248.


156 Of Schism, in Works, 13:126 (emphasis added). Goodwin’s treatment of this and the surrounding issues of authority, office, and nature of the church is the most thorough of the Puritan Congregationalists. See Constitution, Right Order, and Government, pp. 1-298.
The Keys of the Kingdom: The Church

proposing the doctrine of the gospel, with the exercise of the discipline prescribed by himself, unto their own mutual edification, with the glory of Christ, in the preservation and propagation of his kingdom in the world.\[157\]

The question of a catholic-visible church was quite related to and overlapping with the question of the recipients of the “keys” in seventeenth century England.\[158\] Therefore, a national, political, synodical exercise of that authority over believers in multiple parishes would be required.\[159\] The Congregationalists, on the other hand, insisted that there was no ecclesial authority and power outside of particular assemblies. In the words of the Savoy Order, Christ gave the “power for the institution, order, and government of the church” to “particular societies or churches,”\[160\] and this comes “immediately from himself” and not through intermediaries.\[161\] Thus, “besides these particular churches, there is not instituted by Christ any church more extensive or catholic entrusted with power for the administration of his ordinances, or the execution of any authority in his name.”

As an aside, it is important to clarify at this point that, for the Congregationalists, though the magistrate’s role for national religion necessarily touched upon ecclesial matters, the authority was not strictly ecclesiastical. It was not a function of the “keys of the kingdom.” The magistrate was not entrusted with the authority of ecclesiastical discipline or the administration of ordinances. This simple-yet-profound distinction does not negate the interests in and efforts for national religion that were examined in the last chapter. The two kingdom-realms were both important, but not identical – and the “keys of the kingdom” made the exegetical/theological difference.\[162\] This is a point to

\[159\] See Rutherford, The Due Right of Presbyteries, pp. 54-62; The Divine Right of Church-Government and Excommunication (1646), pp. 13-18.
\[160\] The Savoy Declaration of ... Order, Articles 1-4.
\[161\] The Savoy Declaration of ... Order, Article 5.
\[162\] See Owen’s treatment of this in An Inquiry Concerning ... Evangelical Churches, in Works, 15:238-47. Also: Cotton, The Keyes of the Kingdom, pp. 50-53.
which we shall return at the close of this chapter, but it needs to acknowledged now, before the question is begged for too long.

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, in Owen’s earliest ecclesiological work, *Pastors and People* (1643), uses of the word “church” primarily to speak of the universal or catholic-visible church. Similarly, in his brief references to the “keys” in that work he assigned their power to the “officers” or “ministers.” He even jokes that if the “keys” were given to “the people” they would no doubt use them to “lock [the clergy] out of the church.”

For some reason, Owen’s ecclesiological writings in 1646-48 make no reference to the matter of the “keys” in Matt. 16. But they do give clear and repeated articulation about the nature and makeup of the church. In his works “Country Essay” and *Eshcol*, as well as in his meetings with the Essex ministers, he defined the church almost solely in terms of its *particular* expression of gathered, local assemblies. Their membership should be regenerate and volitional, making up a visible society of covenanting saints, who appoint their own elders, and, with those elders, admit new members and exercise discipline. All signs seem to indicate that if Owen had addressed the question of the “keys” in his earliest Congregational writings he would have argued, like other Congregationalists, that it is the church of believers who are the recipients, and not the ministers or office. That was the basic position Cotton articulated in his *Keyes*, which was uniquely influential in Owen’s conversion to Congregationalism.

Owen’s later and more thorough works of ecclesiology do, however, deal with the question of the “keys.” But therein we see a new wrinkle in understanding Owen’s ecclesiology.

**B. The Authority of the Church:**

Who Holds the “Keys of the Kingdom”?

It is not easy to determine Owen’s position on the recipients of the “keys of the kingdom.” Simply put, he cannot strictly be confined to the typical lines of Congregational interpretation. Sometimes he seems emphatic that the “keys” of Matt. 16 have

---

been given to the elders and not the people; other times he seems to alternatively and yet just as emphatically insist that they have been given to the people and not the elders. To further complicate matters, in anyone’s reckoning there are multiple uses of the “keys,” and several areas in which the “keys” are to be exercised — e.g., the appointment of elders, the admittance of new members, the exercise of discipline, the ministry of the Word (whether in lay prophesying or in pastoral preaching), the worship of the church, the overall leadership or “rule” of the church, etc. We have already referred to Cotton’s approach which distinguished between the power and authority of the “keys” — the former was given to members, the latter to elders. Goodwin and Nye suggested a distinction between “Ministeriall Doctrinall Authority” and the “power of Excommunication” which rests in the “whole church.” Others proposed distinguishing between the “first-subject” (proton dektikon) and secondary subjects of the “keys;” or between “authority” and “jurisdiction.” Another view still was that it was the church that received the “keys” in the first place, but elders now “acted as their representatives.” And then there were those who cast their lot more wholly on one side than the other. Rutherford, for instance, plainly insisted that “the Keys were given to Peter representing the Apostles, and his successors in the pastoral charge, not as representing all believers.”

In the case of Owen, however, it does not seem that there is a clear, wholesale acceptance of one view nor a consistently nuanced, categorical delineation between the two main views. Neither does it seem that this is simply one of those occasions where Owen changes his position (or re-changes his position in this case). Rather, his approach to the “keys” is rather complexly and even confusingly stated in several works over the course of multiple years. His most thorough treatments of the “keys” are in The True Nature of a Gospel Church (1689) and A Brief Instruction in

---

164 Goodwin and Nye, “To the Reader” in Cotton, Keyes of the Kingdom (no pagination).
165 See Powell, “October 1643,” pp. 54-82.
167 Rutherford, The Due Right of Presbyteries, pp. 18-19 (see also pp. 9-17)
Reformed and Reforming

the Worship of God and Discipline of the Churches (1667). These will be the focus of what follows.

Owen’s lengthy treatment of the “keys” in True Nature of a Gospel Church begins by stating that Peter’s confession in Matt. 16 “was the ground whereon [Christ] granted the keys of the kingdom;” therefore, “all church-power [was given] unto believers.” Owen suggests this power and its place in the church body is to be exercised in several ways: 1) as a place of privilege granted by spiritual adoption in Christ; 2) in meeting together for “mutual edification;” 3) in the performing of “all church duties” commanded by Christ, such as making a unified confession; 4) in the “administration of his solemn ordinances of worship;” 5) in ordaining and appointing “officers;” and 6), a clarifying statement, that it is the church to whom the “right and power is granted by Christ to call, choose, appoint, and set apart persons” for these offices. A few pages later, Owen reiterates: “this power, under the name of ‘the keys of the kingdom of heaven,’ was originally granted unto the whole professing church of believers.” Here he suggests that the church’s handling of the “keys” has “a double exercise — first, in the call or choosing of officers; secondly, in their voluntary acting with them and under them in all duties of rule.” This duality of the church’s calling of officers and their subsequent submission to those officers is, as we shall see, significant to Owen’s understanding of ecclesiastical authority.

Owen comments that, to this point, he has only considered the matter “objectively,” but it must also be considered “subjectively.” It is not clear what he means by this distinction, except that the latter entails the “officers of the church” in “exercise” of “the government in it appointed by Jesus.” A similar distinction is later given. The calling of elders, he says, “is

---

169 The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:15 (emphasis added).
170 The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:36-37.
171 The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:40.
172 The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:40.
173 The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:40.
The Keys of the Kingdom: The Church

an act of the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” and these “keys are originally and properly given unto the whole church.”\(^{174}\) And yet, they are also given “unto the elders ... ministerially.” Or, put slightly differently: the “grant of church-power” is “given to the whole church, though [it is] to be exercised only by its elders.”\(^{175}\) This already begins to demonstrate a difficulty for ascertaining Owen’s exact position. As he proceeds to provide explanations to the above, the picture becomes even less clear.

First, Owen insists that the church is always a “voluntary society,” and thus the relationship between “a pastor and a flock” must consist in “mutual voluntary” relationship between “one another.” Therefore, the “subjection of the church” to those “qualified for office” must always be by “consent.”\(^{176}\) Or, as he writes similarly in his Brief Instruction in the Worship of God,

Election, by the suffrage and consent of the church, is required unto the calling of a pastor or teacher .... [N]othing is more contrary to this liberty than to have their guides, rulers, and overseers imposed on them without their consent. Besides, the body of the church is obliged to discharge its duty towards Christ in every institution of his; which herein they cannot, if they have not their free consent in the choice of their pastors or elders, but are considered as mute persons or brute creatures ....\(^{177}\)

Owen is adamant that particular churches must consent to their ministers. He is clear and consistent on this point. Sometimes he also couches this in terms of the power of “keys” in the hands of the members.\(^{178}\)

His second explanation about the church’s consent heads in a slightly different direction. Now Owen clarifies that the church’s voluntary choice and election of its leaders “doth not communicate a power from them that choose unto them that are

\(^{174}\) The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:63 (emphasis added).

\(^{175}\) The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:63 (emphasis added).

\(^{176}\) The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:67.

\(^{177}\) Brief Instruction in the Worship of God, in Works, 15:495-96.

\(^{178}\) See The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:63-65.
chosen, as though such a power ... should be formally inherent in
the choosers.” The process of appointment “is only an
instrumental, ministerial means to instate them in that power and
authority which is given unto such officers ....”\textsuperscript{179} In Brief
Instruction the same belief is unfolded, here at much greater length
and with added nuance. It is worth letting Owen speak for himself
for several paragraphs in a row regarding the elders’ rule and
power:

In that the rule of the church and the guidance thereof, in things
appertaining unto the worship of God, is committed unto [the
elders]. And, therefore, whatever they do as elders in the church,
according unto rule, they do it not in the name or authority of the
church by which their power is derived unto them, nor as members
only of the church by their own consent or covenant, but in the
name and authority of Jesus Christ, from whom, by virtue of his law
and ordinance, their ministerial office and power are received. So
that, in the exercise of any church-power, by and with the consent of
the church, there is an obligation thence proceeding, which ariseth
immediately from that authority which they have received of Jesus
Christ, which is the spring of all rule and authority in the church ...
whereby the elders of the church do come to participate of the
power and authority which Christ hath appointed to be exercised in
his church ....\textsuperscript{180}

Though [the elders] have their power by the church, yet they have it
not from the church; nor was that power whereof they are made
partakers, as was said, formally resident in the body of the church,
before their participation of it, but really in Christ himself alone,
and morally in his word or law. And thence is the rule and guidance
of the church committed unto them by Christ ....\textsuperscript{181}

When, as elders, they do or declare any thing in the name of the
church, they do not, as such, put forth any authority committed
unto them from and by the church, but only declare the consent

\textsuperscript{179} The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:67.
\textsuperscript{180} Brief Instruction in the Worship of God, in Works, 15:499-500.
\textsuperscript{181} Brief Instruction in the Worship of God, in Works, 15:501.
The Keys of the Kingdom: The Church

and determination of the church in the exercise of their own liberty and privilege ... committed to [them] ... by Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{182}

The reason, therefore, why the consent of the church is required unto the authoritative acting of the elders therein is, not because from thence any authority doth accrue unto them anew, which virtually and radically they had not before, but because by the rule of the gospel this is required to the orderly acting of their power, which without it would be contrary to rule, and therefore ineffectual ...\textsuperscript{183}

In short, the authority of the elders is not received from the people, but only and directly from Christ. They are uniquely his “stewards” for the ministry of the church. The “consent” of the church is “required” (Owen does not specify in which matters this is so), but this consent is not derived from congregational authority — it is simply a “rule of the gospel;” it is necessary to be “orderly” and anything else would be “ineffectual.” The “keys” receive no mention in the above quotes, but emphasis seems to be put on the authority and unique exercise of power in the elders.

Further in the work, Owen returns to these matters, but specifically within the important test case of discipline and excommunication. Here the language of the “keys” returns. Once again a lengthy quote will help demonstrate the possible peculiarities in Owen’s formulation:

It hath been showed that this power [of the administration of discipline] is granted unto the church by virtue of the law and constitution of Christ. Now, this law assigns the means and way whereby any persons do obtain an interest therein, and makes the just allotments to all concerned in it. What this law, constitution, or word of Christ assigns unto any, as such, that they are the first seat and subject of, by what way or means soever they come to be intrusted therein. Thus, that power or authority which is given unto the elders of the church doth not first formally reside in the body of the church unorganized or distinct from them ...; but they are themselves, as such, the first subject of office-power .... Nor is the

\textsuperscript{182} Brief Instruction in the Worship of God, in Works, 15:501.

\textsuperscript{183} Brief Instruction in the Worship of God, in Works, 15:501.
interest of the whole church in this power of discipline, whatever it be, given unto it by the elders, but is immediately granted unto it by the will and law of the Lord Jesus. ... In this way and manner the authority above described is given in the first place, as such, unto the elders of the church. ... And it is that power of office whereby they are enabled for the discharge of their whole duty ... called the “power of the keys.”

In short, at least in this paragraph, Owen sees the elders as the “first subject” (proton dektikon) of the “keys.” The exercise of discipline is primarily in their hands.

As he proceeds, he makes clear that he does not agree with the distinctions between “order” and “jurisdiction,” or between “ministry” and “discipline” as others have taught. Rather, he believes that the “power” is given to the whole “office;” and it is all “ministerial,” arising from the “authority of Christ committed” to them. He does clarify that the “body of the church” also has an interest in the “administration of this power of discipline.” He lists two ways in which this is so: 1) as they “consider, try, and make a judgment” in cases of discipline; 2) by giving their “consent unto all acts of church-power.” Clarifying the second, Owen writes that “though [the disciplinary power] belong not formally to” their “authority,” the consent of the people is “necessary for” the overall “validity and efficacy” of the discipline. Further, Owen insists, the people do maintain a “liberty of dissent, when anything is proposed to be done” without “warrant ... from the word.”

In True Nature of a Gospel Church, “admission and exclusion” of members are treated together. Owen makes clear that the basis and exercise of authority is the same for the front and back doors of the church. “Both of these are acts of church power ... are to be exercised by the elders only.” Yes, the church body has a “power inherent” in it to “receive into its incorporation,” and also to

---

184 Brief Instruction in the Worship of God, in Works, 15:514 (emphasis added).
186 Brief Instruction in the Worship of God, in Works, 15:515-16.
187 Brief Instruction in the Worship of God, in Works, 15:516.
188 The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:136.
The Keys of the Kingdom: The Church

“reject or withhold” its privileges; but in these “actings” of the church, “there is no exercise of the power of the keys ....”\(^{189}\) Conversely, the “elders or rulers” have a “peculiar authority committed” to them “for those acts” of “admission and exclusion of members.” In sum: “the key of rule is committed unto the elders of the church, to be applied with the consent of the whole society ....”\(^{190}\)

C. Summary and Analysis

What can be said for Owen’s treatments of the “keys” in these two important, late ecclesiological works? A number of observations present themselves.

First, we must note where there seems to be possible inconsistency or at least uncertainty. The foremost example is that Owen sometimes assigns the “keys” to the church body based on confession of faith, and other times to the elders directly from Christ and not through the saints. Sometimes these statements have added nuance, explanation, and qualification in context but not consistently or uniformly so. His contemporaries often adopted their own taxonomies to break down the lines of authority, and repeatedly referred to these distinctions when speaking of the “keys.”\(^{191}\) Not so with Owen. Thus, it is not clear whether his view is that the “keys” were given to the church and exercised by the elders, or given to the church of which the elders are representatives. It is also uncertain if he believed there are distinguishable “keys” or that distinguishable parts of the “keys” are split between the pastors and the people. Perhaps further studies will demonstrate more clarity on Owen’s view of the “keys.” At this stage, however, it would seem that, unlike many other articulations of ecclesiastical power in the seventeenth century, Owen never seems to have landed on a clear, consistently worded, categorically nuanced description of the “keys.”

\(^{189}\) The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:136-37.

\(^{190}\) The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:137.

\(^{191}\) See, for example, Gisbertus Voetius, Politicae Ecclesiasticae (1663), vol. 1.
Second, when Owen speaks of the “keys” being assigned directly to the elders for the exercise of “admission and exclusion” of the membership he is more generally identifying with the interpretive lines of his Presbyterian rather than Congregationalist brethren. Surprisingly, he is also demonstrating that his later position is basically consistent with the brief references in his earliest ecclesiology work, which were written while he was an avowed Presbyterian. In these works he assigned the “keys” to the “office” rather than the “people.” The test case of discipline and excommunication is telling. Almost all Congregationalists recognized the necessary pastoral leadership role of the elders in admonishment and excommunication, but the “key” of that discipline (or that function of those “keys”) was usually tied to the congregation as a whole rather than to ministers. Owen assigns this part of the “keys” to the elders, and only briefly acknowledges necessary “consent” from the congregation. It is the reverse in Cotton’s Keyes. Perhaps Owen’s model in actuality functioned no differently than Cotton’s or Goodwin’s, but the theological/exegetical lines and points of emphasis do differ. On this point, Owen’s trek into Congregationalism did not uniformly follow any one path and model. And yet, it must also be noted, that his treatment of the “keys” probably comes closer to Cotton’s than any others, since Cotton also assigned no small portion of the “keys” directly to the elders.

Third, in light of the above, it must also be firmly stated that there is nothing in Owen’s later ecclesiological works which is beyond the basic elements of Congregationalism. The “keys” being given to the “brethren” was one argument for

---

192 Another example would be New England document The Cambridge Platform (1648), chap. 5.
193 Cotton, Keyes of the Kingdom, pp. 12-16.
194 For example, see John Cotton, The Doctrine of the Church (1644): “Q.30 To whom hath Christ committed the Government of his Church? Ans. Partly to the body of the Church, in respect to the slate or frame of it, but principally to the Presbytery [or eldership] in respect of the order and administration of it” (p. 10). In light of the above, Nuttall’s assessment of the Savoy Assembly is unfortunate: “Many of them carried forward the more radical, Separatist tradition which descended from Browne and Robinson rather than from Cotton” (Nuttall, Visible Saints, p. 19).
Congregationalism — and one not infrequently used by Owen’s contemporaries — but the other main view, that the “keys” were given to the ministers, did not demand a Presbyterian view of the church. Owen is proof of that since, starting in 1646 and throughout the rest of his life he views the nature of the church as gathered, volitional, regenerate, and local or particular. He is also clear and consistent that the appointment of officers is to be handled from within local churches and must always be by the consent of the congregation. It is telling that there is nothing in Owen’s view articulated above which directly contradicts anything in the Savoy Assembly’s documents.\footnote{While the Savoy’s Church Order speaks much about “power” there are no explicit references to the “keys” of Matt. 16.} He never ties the “keys” to a catholic-visible church or envisions a body of ministers exercising governing authority over multiple congregations.\footnote{In the previous chapter, the Cromwellian system of “triers” and “ejectors” was discussed. It should be clarified that Owen’s significant involvement with that national system does not contradict what is being described in this chapter — viz. the congregation’s role in their own ministerial appointments. As Halcomb states, “the system of triers and ejectors ... merely gave approbation for the placement of a minister, rather than ordaining him.” See Halcomb, “Congregational Religious Practice,” pp. 76-77 (see also all of chap. 8). Also: Martin Winstone, “The Church in Cromwellian England: Initiatives for Reform of the Ministry During the Interregnum” (MLitt thesis, Univ. of Oxford, 1995).} Therefore, there is no reason to believe that Owen’s last published work of ecclesiology, True Nature of a Gospel Church, was a return to Presbyterianism, as some have claimed.\footnote{Contra Lee, John Owen Represbyterianized, cf. Goold’s editorial comments on this issue in Works, 16:2.} Owen may be a rather unique Congregationalist with a slightly less democratic model of Congregationalism, and thus he may indeed share small points of agreement with some Presbyterians, but that does not make him a Presbyterian.

Fourth, it is not clear what congregational “consent” would look like according to Owen in the life and function of an ideal Congregational church.\footnote{While unfortunately very little attention is given to Owen’s church experience, the recent work of Halcomb provides an excellent portrait of actual Congregational church life during the English Revolution. See Halcomb, “Congregational Religious Practice,” esp. chaps. 2-4.} He, in fact, seems to acknowledge his
intention to avoid such particulars when he writes, “How far the government of the church may be denominated democratical from the necessary consent of the people unto the principal acts of it in its exercise, I shall not determine ....” In other words, as to just how democratic a church’s governance may be — whether a mere majority-opinion is sufficient, in what matters there must be consent, etc. — he will not say. Rather, he insists only on two binary scriptural principles for the church’s government: 1) that it is “voluntary, as unto the manner of its exercise,” and 2) that it is “in dutiful compliance with the guidance of the rule.” On the one hand, Owen speaks of “consent” not infrequently throughout his ecclesiological writings — sometimes even while making his firmest statements about the elders’ power and authority. He also clearly sees “suffrage” as essential to determining that consent. On the other hand, he is regularly critical of what is merely “democratical.” He also insists that “where any thing is acted and disposed in the church by suffrage, or the plurality of voices, the vote of the fraternity is not determining and authoritative, but only declarative of consent and obedience ....” This distinction between “consent” and “authority” for the people of the church seems to be unique with Owen. The people’s consent is “naturally” necessary, but their “vote” is not an authority. Also telling is his advice to ministers when their church assembly refuses to give consent to their pastoral leadership. The shepherds must: 1) instruct, 2) warn, 3) wait, and, if necessary, 4) seek advice from other churches. This is telling for both parts of the pastors and people relationship. The former cannot rule autocratically,

---


201 The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:131. Very rarely does Owen use the term “vote,” preferring instead the less specific terms “consent” and “suffrage.”

202 See, for example, The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 15:194.


204 See The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in Works, 16:131-36 for Owen’s arguments that consent is simply according to nature.

205 Brief Instruction in the Worship of God, in Works, 15:502. Each of these four points is given elaboration in context.
sovereignly, and absolutely but must lead “naturally;” the latter cannot overthrow the “beautiful order which Jesus Christ hath ordained,” which would tend toward “disorder” or even “anarchy.”

In sum, it is not precisely clear where the lines of ministerial authority and congregational consent intersect, overlap, and at times possibly conflict in Owen’s ecclesiology and practice, but he is keen to attempt to hold the two in tension—a unique tension based on his own blend of exegetical, doctrinal, historical, practical, and scholastic arguments. Cotton was, indeed, influential on Owen’s ecclesiology, but not uniformly determinative.

The same can also be said for one more area of analysis: the connection between liberty and ecclesiology. Here we will compare and contrast the two Congregational stalwarts, Owen and Cotton.

VII. Connecting Liberty and Ecclesiology

No small amount of ink has been spent regarding John Cotton’s relationship (whether as an influence and/or embarrassment) to England’s Congregationalists in both ecclesiastical and civil matters. There is no indication in Owen’s works that he leaned upon the New Englander for his political views of the magistrate or liberty, as he clearly did for ecclesiology. But regardless of possible influences, our concern in what follows is with the points of agreement and/or divergence between the two.

Cotton’s reputation has undoubtedly been shaped largely by his debates with Roger Williams. The latter not only argued strongly against all religious persecution, but for wholesale toleration. Also, Williams argued for a firm separation of

207 For example: Bremer, Congregational Communions; Susan Hardman Moore, Pilgrims: New World Settlers and the Call of Home (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2007), chap. 7; Paul, ed., An Apologetical Narration; Powell, “The Last Confession,” chap. 1; idem, “The Dissenting Brethren and the Power of the Keys.”
208 Williams, The Bloudy Tenent for Persecution for Cause of Conscience (1644).
church and state — something unthinkable to Cotton. Cotton responded by defending the use of the magistrate's role in punishing heretics who were repeatedly belligerent.\footnote{Cotton, \textit{The Bloudy Tenent Washed and Made White in the Bloud of the Lamb} (1647).} Also key to Cotton’s response was the aim to protect the right of churches to discipline (or excommunicate) professors of the gospel who became unrepentant in their licentiousness, heresy, and/or trouble-making — something Williams rejected.\footnote{Cotton, \textit{The Bloudy Tenent Washed}, pp. 60-64, 119-32.} Thus, Cotton distinguished between believers and unbelievers, with the former being held to a higher standard (at least by their churches). He did not encourage the state's imposition of religion (beliefs or practice) on non-Christians.\footnote{See Cotton, \textit{The Bloudy Tenent Washed}, pp. 33, 165, \textit{passim}.} He did, however, believe in protecting saints from those who “continue to seduce others unto his Damnable Heresy.”\footnote{Cotton, \textit{The Bloudy Tenent Washed}, p. 10.} Further, for the saints, he distinguished between matters fundamental and those extra-fundamental “wherein men may differ in judgment.”\footnote{This is made more clear in Cotton, \textit{The Controversy Concerning Liberty of Conscience in Matters of Religion} (1649), p. 9.}

Because Cotton took the side of limiting toleration in this famous debate, he has often been wrongly caricatured as one more for the sword than for liberty.\footnote{For more on this, see Conrad Wright, “John Cotton Washed and Made White,” in \textit{Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History: Essays Presented to George Huntston Williams on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday}, F.F. Church and Timothy George, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 1979), pp. 338-50.} However, the specific theses and parameters of his vision of liberty are extremely close to Owen’s. As was shown in the previous chapter, Owen never divided the state from matters of religion, nor did he favor a “universal concession of an unbounded liberty, or ... bold, unbridled licentiousness, for every one to vent what he pleaseth, and to take what course seems good in his own eyes, in things concerning religion and the worship of God ....”\footnote{“A Country Essay,” in \textit{Works}, 8:57-58.} He did not believe in coercion or imposition against any and all, especially
among the saints in matters extra-fundamental. Also, as this chapter has demonstrated, Owen believed in and wrote much on the visible church, regenerate membership, and church discipline. In short, he would not at all have sided with Williams in the New England debate.\textsuperscript{216}

Are there any differences between Owen and Cotton on liberty then? The answer to that is yes, but a qualified one. Many such differences can be attributed to emphases, language, and contexts. Painting with a wide brush, Owen’s works on liberty do indeed seem to bemoan persecution and praise liberty. Cotton’s conversely stresses the limits of liberty and the power of the magistrate. Differences in tone and emphasis are enough that John Coffey has even suggested that Owen’s “critique of ... coercion” has “the moral or prophetic fervour ... which could come straight from the pages of [Williams’] the Bloudy Tenent.”\textsuperscript{217} However, context is key.

Owen’s works touching on liberty come primarily from two similar contexts: (1) his early sermons (and appendices), when the stench of Laudian persecution was still in his nostril’s and the imposition of Presbyterian uniformity was looming, (i.e., the 1640s);\textsuperscript{218} (2) his later sermons, tracts, and other works during the days of nonconformity and Puritan persecution under the Act of Uniformity (i.e., post-1662).\textsuperscript{219} In other words, Owen preached and wrote on liberty in contexts of (threatened or real) persecution, and hence liberty tends to be praised and pushed rather than curtailed.\textsuperscript{220}

Cotton’s New England was, of course, very different than England in the 1630s, 1640s, and 1660s. Cotton himself

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[216]{Williams himself proves this by his surrejoinder to Cotton, which simultaneously functioned as a rather nasty response to the Humble Proposals of Owen & Co.: The Bloudy Tenent Made Yet More Bloudy (1652).}
\footnotetext[217]{Coffey, “John Owen and the Puritan Toleration Controversy,” p. 232.}
\footnotetext[218]{In Works, vol. 8.}
\footnotetext[219]{Most of which are found in Works, vols. 13-16.}
\footnotetext[220]{Of course, the 1650s were unique in that those years were generally occupied with Owen’s proactive work towards liberty, unity, and confessionalization; but his literary works generally fall on either side of the Protectorate. This is a contextual dynamic often neglected in examinations of Owen’s works on liberty.}
\end{footnotes}

171
acknowledged as much in his “Propositions [for] the Reformation on ... the Churches of England” in 1645.\textsuperscript{221} Sure, Owen had concerns on both his right and his left (Episcopal and Presbyterian uniformity on the one, and Socinianism and Quakers on the other), but the “audience” of his works in the 1640s and 1660ff was primarily the right: a (potentially) persecuting government.\textsuperscript{222} Cotton had opponents almost solely to his left — the most vocal, of course, being Williams. The polemical nature of Cotton’s response to Williams, then, dictated his points of emphases in \textit{Bloudy Tenent Washed}.\textsuperscript{223} As providence would have it, this ended up being his most thorough work on toleration. In sum, it should be no surprise if the same beliefs on religion, government, and liberty would, in differing contexts, sound differently, and need to stress different points.

The question of consistency between Cotton and Owen becomes slightly more complex on the finer point of the possible execution for heresy. Cotton’s works on toleration were far from shy about the magistrate’s lawful use of “the sword” (i.e., execution) as a means to protect the saints from heretical seducers.\textsuperscript{224} As Coffey has shown, Owen’s early writings on liberty frequently and passionately lament the execution of heretics.\textsuperscript{225} But Coffee also asserts that between 1652 and the Restoration, Owen’s political instincts grew more conservative and he came to at least be open to the possibility of capitol punishment for heresy.\textsuperscript{226} Yet, in the 1640s, argues Coffey, the two

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{221} See Cotton, \textit{The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England} (1645), pp. 113-16.
\item \textsuperscript{222} While Coffey does not make this point exactly, he does make clear that “the great bulk of [Owen’s “Country Essay”] was directed against hardline Presbyterian advocates of uniformity” (“John Owen and the Puritan Toleration Controversy,” p. 232).
\item \textsuperscript{223} Indeed, Cotton’s \textit{Bloudy Tenent Washed} was a meticulous paragraph-by-paragraph response to Williams’ work.
\item \textsuperscript{224} See Cotton, \textit{Bloudy Tenent Washed}, passim; \textit{Controversy Concerning Liberty}, pp. 14-16.
\item \textsuperscript{225} Coffee, “John Owen and the Puritan Toleration Controversy,” pp. 231-38.
\end{itemize}
The Keys of the Kingdom: The Church

Congregationalists were sounded very different messages on liberty/toleration. Yet upon more careful inspection the two are much closer even on this important-but-fine point. Yes, Owen indeed laments execution for heresy in his early writings, but an important nuance is often overlooked. Take for example his 1646 “Country Essay”:

... whatsoever restraint or other punishment may be allowed in case of grosser errors, yet slaying of heretics for simple heresy, as they call it, for my part I cannot close withal; nor shall ever give my vote to the burning, hanging, or killing of a man, otherwise upright, honest, and peaceable in the state, merely because he misbelieveth any point of Christian faith....

Even in 1646 Owen’s condemnation of the execution of heretics had a concession: he did not endorse punishment for mere heresy; thus, he did not say what the state should do in cases where a heretic is not “otherwise upright, honest, and peaceable.” Likewise his later discussion of the infamous execution of Miguel Servetus stresses the belligerence and persistence of Servetus, rather than his bare heresy. Writing in 1655, Owen asserts, “Servetus came out of Spain on purpose to disturb and seduce them who knew nothing of his abominations.” Owen then quotes extensively from Beza’s account of Servetus’ “horried blasphemies” and his ridicule of essential orthodoxy. Owen concludes: “I must say he is the only person in the world, that I ever read or heard of, that ever died upon the account of religion, in reference to whom the zeal of them that put him to death may be acquitted.”

Cotton is far more bold than Owen in his affirmation of Servetus’ execution specifically, and in the use of the sword

228 Works, 8:63-64 (emphasis added).
229 Vindiciae Evangelicae, or The Mystery of the Gospel Vindivacted and Socinianism Examined (1655), in Works, 12:41.
generally. However, like Owen, certain conditions for the punishment or execution of heretics are frequently articulated in Cotton’s writings too. He writes, “none is to be punished for his conscience ... unless his error be fundamental, or seditiously and turbently promoted ....”231 The sword is required only when “admonition” has failed, and when the person persists in “a boisterous and arrogant spirit, to the disturbance of civil peace.”232 Then, they are to be “restrained,” by any means necessary, “from seducing any unto pernicious errors.”233 Both Owen and Cotton, in passages like these, are not concerned merely for public order (or the “reformation of manners”234), but for the church’s protection and the gospel’s propagation. Those are concerns and aims that they share, even if they sound differently in distinct contexts and continents.

This contextual dynamic can also be observed through Owen’s emphasis on liturgy in his works of liberty. As the previous chapter of this work concluded, it was not the Church of England’s Thirty-Nine Articles that kept Owen out of the post-Restoration church. It was the imposition of The Book of Common Prayer. Thus, his post-Restoration works on nation and church frequently argue against the imposition of prayers and liturgy and do so particularly on account of liberty of conscience.235 For Owen and his Congregationalist brethren, liberty of conscience was not a license for neglect, sin, and/or the twisting of faith and worship; it was, first and foremost, about the freedom to obey what Christ had prescribed for his church in the Scriptures. The problem, then, with the imposition of rote prayers was not just that they were imposed, but that they stood in the way of true exercise of what Christ had truly imposed or commanded. Christ had commanded true or free prayer, not a form of prayer. The “prayer

231 Cotton, Controversy Concerning Liberty, p. 11.
233 Cotton, Controversy Concerning Liberty, p. 9-11.
235 See especially A Discourse Concerning Liturgies and their Imposition (1662), in Works, 15:1-55.
book” also, according to Owen replaced Christ’s gifts of Spirit-wrought, prayer and worship.\(^\text{236}\) “The Lord Jesus Christ bestows gifts upon” the church, “requiring the use and exercise of them in the work ...”\(^\text{237}\) This was all a matter of the liberty of conscience for Owen, who, again, wrote in these ways countless times.\(^\text{238}\)

Cotton likely would have agreed with all of this. In his “Proposals” for the Reformation of the Churches in England, he suggested: “For set forms of prayer, or prescript liturgies, let them not be enjoyned unto the ministers of the churches, but let the ministers ... give up themselves wholly unto prayer ....”\(^\text{239}\) However, because there was no threat of an imposition of a liturgy in his New England context he wrote almost nothing else against set forms of prayers (or even on worship in general). Nor did he decry the imposition of prayers on account of the liberty of conscience as Owen and other English nonconformists did. The separate contexts greatly shaped their different needs and aims for their writings on liberty. And yet, both Owen and Cotton saw the limits and reaches of liberty touching upon Christ’s kingdom in the church. Both saw their views of civil government, liberty, and national religion all part and parcel with their Congregationalism.

As Geoffrey Nuttall observed over fifty years ago, it was the “principle of freedom” that connected the Congregationalist’s view of ecclesiastical worship and membership with a particular view of liberty, not compulsion, for national politics.\(^\text{240}\)

\(^\text{236}\) See A Discourse Concerning Liturgies, chap. 9, in Works, 15:46ff.

\(^\text{237}\) A Discourse Concerning Liturgies, in Works, 15:53.


\(^\text{240}\) See Nuttall, Visible Saints, pp. 101-30. Also, readers should recall the relevance of the Preface to the Savoy Declaration on this point of “freeness” of confession (see Chap. 3 of this work).
VIII. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to provide the most thorough analysis to date on Owen’s ecclesiological transition to Congregationalism. It has shown that Owen’s earliest position was Presbyterian but with Congregationalist sensitivities (especially the “one-another” ministry of the church body). Sometime between 1644 and 1646 Cotton’s *Keyes of the Kingdom* was integrally influential in Owen embracing the Congregational way. Clear evidence of his Congregationalist convictions and practice were apparent by 1646. However, when it comes to Owen’s later, fuller writings on ecclesiology, the two typical ecclesiological litmus tests of his day suggest slightly unusual interpretive lines in his Congregational DNA: (1) he embraced the catholic-visible category for the nature of the church, and (2) he not infrequently assigned the “keys of the kingdom” to the elders and not believers. Yet this does not at all suggest that Owen reverted to Presbyterianism or found a middle road. In fact he remained highly influential for the Congregational cause at home and abroad long after his death.241 It does suggest, however, that the debates that split Westminster Assembly in 1643 were no longer relevant by the time Owen became the Congregationalists’ chief spokesman. While Cotton’s *Keyes* was influential, Owen carved out his own rather unique version of Congregationalism. What remained steady from Owen’s earliest days of ministry to his last was a hope and pursuit to unite “the godly,” whether through national comprehension or simply extra-local communion. This unifying aim and Congregationalist ecclesiology intersected and overlapped with Owen’s views of the magistrate, liberty, unity, and confession-alization — and it is on these points, in fact, that we find more similarities between Owen and Cotton than on mere Congregational polity. Even if possible influences are undeterminable, the similarities abound.

Owen’s local church ecclesiology — for better or worse — was hitched to his views of the magistrate, liberty, unity, and confession-alization because these were all wrapped up in the

241 On this point, see Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, p. 169.
broader category of the manifestation of the kingdom of Christ on earth. But, as was touched upon earlier in this chapter, for all of the overlap and interrelationship between what is national/civil and what is ecclesial, there is also an important distinction between the two. The “keys of the kingdom” have been given to churches and not to the magistrate. The government’s role in national religion touched upon ecclesial matters, but were not strictly ecclesiastical. Primarily the magistrate was to provide freedoms for the true exercise of religion by the saints and a general propagation of the truth owned by the state. National liberty was necessary precisely because the state did not have determinative authority to discipline and intimately lead, as true churches did. It did not hold the “keys of the kingdom.”

That said, both the national/civil and local/ecclesiastical elements of the kingdom did carry an eschatological connection in Owen’s thought. That eschatological facet of the kingdom has been purposefully left aside in chapters thus far; but it is there to which we now turn.
Chapter 5
The Coming of the Kingdom: Eschatology and its Political-Ecclesiastical Significance

As has been shown, for Owen, the kingdom of Christ is to be made visible, both civilly and congregationally. But there is an important heretofore-unmentioned apocalyptic dimension to these. For Owen, the kingdom is a spiritual realm that steadily grows and is made more visible until it blossoms in the latter day—an age of “latter-day glory.” Such an eschatological vision unblushingly combined the interpretation of Scripture with the interpretation of circumstance or providence. Hopeful circumstances went hand-in-hand with this hopeful eschatology. Most Owen scholars have therefore concluded that in the less hopeful days of the Restoration, Owen’s eschatology was necessarily modified. This chapter will re-examine that thesis by focusing on Owen’s sermons in their politico-ecclesiastical contexts. It will also seek to show how Owen’s eschatology stands behind and holds together many of the themes already examined in this study: England’s ongoing reformation, politics, confessionalization, uniting “the godly,” liberty, ecclesiology in general, and Congregationalism specifically.

I. Introductory Matters

John Owen’s eschatology has been assessed in a number of historical-theological studies, but each in varying degrees and with varying conclusions. In fact, it is probably not an exaggeration to say that these different works have produced an equal number of differing conclusions about his end-time beliefs. An unhurried overview of these previous assessments will not only help demonstrate the need for this chapter but also partly direct the scope and aims of our study.
A. Varying Assessments of Owen’s Eschatology

Some scholars have labeled Owen’s eschatology as millenarian.¹ Others have insisted that his view, which is better labeled “latter-day glory” (hereafter LDG), is distinguishable from seventeenth century millenarianism.² A number of scholars have suggested that Owen’s expectant eschatology was inherently connected to his Congregationalist ecclesiology.³ Many have, of course, also made the same argument more broadly—that, in general, the more hopeful and “earthly” forms of eschatology in Congregationalists were foundational to their ecclesiological differences with Presbyterians.⁴ Some analyses of Owen specifically have argued similarly for a connection between his eschatology and political views.⁵ Of course, the precise identity of his ideal for civil government has itself been variously understood.⁶ Some, tying Owen’s eschatology to a strong


⁵ Griffiths, Redeem the Time, pp. 108-30. See also Lamont, Godly Rule, passim.

preference for Republicanism, for instance, have argued that his belief in the soon return of King Jesus left no room for a human king.\textsuperscript{7} His view of and possible involvement in several controversial events have also been differently assessed in the secondary literature – e.g., the execution of Charles I, the wars in Ireland, opposing Oliver Cromwell’s ascendency to the throne, the Wallingford House plot, the Rye House plot, etc. One’s understanding of Owen’s connection to such “conspiratory politics” has often affected the degree to which one is willing to see a “radical” bent, not only in his politics but also his apocalyptic thought.\textsuperscript{8} According to one historian, though Owen “retreated from his early [apocalyptic] literalism” after 1660, nevertheless his “radical politics remained.”\textsuperscript{9} Regardless of the diversity of these interpretations, one consistency is his interest and involvement in the political movings-and-shakings of the time.

Numerous assessments have also attempted to identify precisely what was formative to Owen’s eschatology. Especially important is the question of the degree to which his views were tied to the interpretation of providence, particularly the advances of the Puritan agenda in the 1640-50s.\textsuperscript{10} Those who have seen Owen’s hopeful eschatology as significantly tied to the Revolution’s puritanically-optimistic circumstances have also been generally more inclined to suggest that his later eschatological views were adversely affected by the reversal of fortunes following the Restoration.\textsuperscript{11} Sebastian Rehnman has suggested that the “experience of defeat” in the Restoration affected more than eschatology, even Owen’s very approach to theology and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{7} Griffiths, Redeem the Time, pp. 121-32.
\item \textsuperscript{8} For example: Liu, Discord in Zion, pp. 65-67, 117-60.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Crawford Gribben, The Puritan Millennium: Literature and Theology, 1550-1682 (Dublin: Four Court Press, 2000), pp. 18-19. Gribben claims, only in passing, that in the early 1680s Owen “was involved in a radical anti-government conspiracy network” (p. 177).
\item \textsuperscript{11} Kapic, Communion with God, p. 27.
\end{itemize}
Reformed and Reforming

theological method — at least for a time. This is a new suggestion in the study of Owen, as is the thesis that, for the Republican-Owen, it was the nation’s return to a monarchy which brought upon God’s judgment in the following decades. Not all of these issues can be dealt with in this chapter, though many will be touched upon. What deserves more scrutiny is the general assessment that the disenfranchising circumstances of the years of nonconformity disillusionment gave way to eschatological revision. In other words, Owen’s eschatology went through necessary alteration post-1660. At times, the idea has even reached factoid status (i.e., repeated so much it becomes axiomatic or assumed).

One final assessment of Owen’s eschatology must initially be mentioned. According to Lloyd Glyn Williams, it was not the 1660s, but the early- to mid-1650s where Owen’s eschatological disillusionment began to emerge. By the launch of the Protectorate in 1653, Williams argues, “the godly” were now largely in power but the eschatological kingdom had mysteriously not materialized with it. There was still extensive disunity among the rulers as well as ungodliness among the people. Thus, he writes:

---


13 Griffiths, Redeem the Time, pp. 130-41.

14 Toon is cautious but not specific about whether Owen’s view of LDG went through upheaval after the Restoration (Toon, God’s Statesman, pp. 120-21). The question is hinted at but, in my opinion, never answered in Griffith, Redeem the Time, pp. 95-143.

15 This is the case in the otherwise excellent work by Kapic when he writes, only in passing, “As realities on the ground changed, Owen was willing to rethink elements of his eschatological framework, since he allowed not simply for theology to shape experience, but also for experience to have a role in refining theological conclusions” (Communion with God, p. 27). Smith, while seeking to provide a “synopsis” of Owen’s eschatology provided only one mistaken sentence on Owen’s later view: “Owen too was enamored with ‘chronologies and computations,’ only to become disillusioned with them after the Restoration” (“The Pragmatic Puritan Eschatology of John Owen,” p. 342). The specific issues of “chronologies and computations” will be addressed toward the end of this chapter.
the number of those committed to the corporate ideals of the “good old cause” of Puritanism continued to dwindle year by year [in the 1650s] .... Confident speculations about the providential meaning of current events became less common. Toleration was often espoused on the basis of skepticism rather than millenarianism. The fervor of Puritan piety cooled. Churches and “denominational” groups started turning inward. ... The old national vision with its collective theological basis began to be a feature of the past.16

Owen, according to this author, is typical of this trend.

In sum, the variations for interpreting Owen’s eschatology seem almost endless. But it is with the final few options that we find particular relevance to this study. Their differences and ambiguities raise a number of questions: Did parts of Owen’s eschatology undergo adjustment? If so, did this shift in theology or expectations come within the demanded conformity of the Restoration or in the muddled circumstances of the Protectorate? In light of Owen’s open willingness to make alterations in other areas — as we have seen in earlier chapters — a shift in his end-time beliefs would not be surprising. Further, the quickly changing political-ecclesiastical circumstances of the mid-seventeenth century are undeniable, and the shifting landscape would lend itself to the possibility of Owen renegotiating a nationally-oriented eschatology. But, as is clear from the above, a vast number of questions remain about these issues; consensus is far from having been reached even on a most basic level.

Also, the historiography of seventeenth century apocalyptic thought has gone through some important revisions in the last couple decades. A few words about these developments in the secondary literature are in order to further explain the direction and aims of this chapter.

16 Williams, “God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen,” pp. 68-69. This argument is laid out in detail on pp. 50-91, building upon elements of the earlier assessments of the 1650s made by Lamont, Godly Rule, and Liu, Discord in Zion. For both Lamont and Williams, in my opinion, there is an unnecessary preoccupation with the connections (and tensions) between the concept of “godly rule” and the “Calvinistic” view of providence and soteriology.
B. Rethinking Apocalyptic Historiography

Many of the above treatments of Owen’s eschatology have reflected older historiographical models for assessing the general contours and developments of apocalyptic thought in the seventeenth century. The rather pessimistic evaluations of “the godly” during the Protectorate by Lamont and Liu have been increasingly reassessed by more recent historians. But the older


18 Representative of the older scholarship are: Lamont, Godly Rule; Liu, Discord in Zion. Lamont’s later work (Richard Baxter and the Millennium) reassessed his earlier
The Coming of the Kingdom: Eschatology

Historiography on the 1650s has played no small part in the thesis (mentioned above) that a pessimistic outlook on the Protectorate formed the basis for Owen’s reevaluation of a hopeful eschatology during that decade. The argument that Owen’s end-time beliefs changed in the Restoration is similarly based on older historiographical models. Nowhere is the reappraisal of apocalyptic historiography on the whole better demonstrated than in Jeffrey Jue’s monograph on Jospeh Mede. Although the eschatological systems of Mede and Owen were not identical – Mede’s being millenarian and Owen’s the LDG view – they were similar enough that the methodology of Jue’s work deserves consideration for our approach in this chapter.

Jue summarizes the older apocalyptic historiography as having overly tied seventeenth century millenarianism to: 1) radical ideologies, 2) political activism, and 3) anti-Laudian ecclesiology. In fact, the eschatology was a kind of rhetorical vehicle for their politico-social aims. Or, the eschatology served the desire for revolution, and not vice-versa. Thus, after the Restoration, according to the older historiography, interest in apocalyptic thought all but vanished alongside the fading hope to affect a political-ecclesiastical-social change. Although Mede died well before 1660, his kind of millenarianism, according to Jue, would seem to raise questions about the historiographical basis for the vanishing apocalypticism after the Restoration. Of course, this is not to say that more “radical” millenarians did not exist in the seventeenth century, nor that they did not claim Mede for an

---

19 Williams, “God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen.”


exegetical and theological influence. But, they “were not authentic disciples of Mede,” according to Jue.\footnote{Jue, \textit{Heaven Upon Earth}, p. 144.}

For Mede, millenarianism did not carry much ecclesiastical-political significance at all. As such, “Puritan” is probably not an appropriate label for the “father of millenarianism” since he fully supported the practice and theology of the Laudian church and was generally hesitant to speak about the controversial ecclesiastical matters of his times.\footnote{See Jue, \textit{Heaven Upon Earth}, p. 246.} According to Jue, Mede’s “Apocalyptic interest ... was a scholarly pursuit of biblical truth and knowledge.”\footnote{Jue, \textit{Heaven Upon Earth}, p. 144.} Complimenting Jue’s thesis has been the work of Warren Johnston on the eschatologies of the later seventeenth century. Johnston has repeatedly shown that “the Restoration did not stifle the articulation of apocalyptic beliefs .... Instead, resignation to the post-1660 political reality forced the adaptation of apocalyptic expectations and expression ....”\footnote{Warren Johnston, “The Patience of the Saints, the Apocalypse, and Moderate Nonconformity in Restoration England,” \textit{Canadian Journal of History} 38 (2003) 505-20. See also idem, “The Anglican Apocalypse in Restoration England,” \textit{Journal of Ecclesiastical History} 55 (2004) 467-501; “Revelation and the Revolution of 1688-1689,” \textit{The Historical Journal} 48 (2005) 351-89; “Apocalypticism in Restoration England.”} Mede’s legacy, therefore, according to Jue, “produced a sustained interest in millenarianism that was not bound exclusively to the political circumstances of the 1640-50s.”\footnote{Jue, \textit{Heaven upon Earth}, p. 247.}

It is easy to see the important implications of such a historiographical reassessment. In the older scholarship a strict dividing line of 1660 has often been axiomatic. It is, for example, quite telling that so many examinations of Puritan eschatology cease their examination at 1660 — at least implying, and at times


\footnote{Jue, \textit{Heaven upon Earth}, p. 247. The post-Restoration apocalyptic analyses of Johnston and Jue have, of course, built upon other historians who more generally argued for the continuing relevance of religion in seventeenth century politics (versus more secularizing historical portraits). See, for example, Tim Harris, Paul Seaward, and Mark Goldie, eds., \textit{The Politics of Religion in Restoration England} (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); cf. Alan Houston and Steve Pincus, eds., \textit{A Nation Transformed: England after the Restoration} (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001).}
explicitly suggesting, that those beliefs necessarily changed or waned under post-Restoration disillusionment; that post-1660 eschatology is a different sort of thing, if it existed much at all. In light of this, it is worth consideration whether this unfair assessment of the history of apocalyptic thought has had an exaggerated effect on the previous attempts to understand Owen’s later eschatological beliefs. This newer historiography of apocalyptic thought also further raises questions about what shaped his eschatology. And, of course, it is also important to consider similar questions in the reverse: how eschatology may shape other aspects of theology and practice, especially political and ecclesiastical ideals and pursuits.

Before exploring such questions, however, one more introductory point must be made regarding the basic tenets and contours of the two most prevalent eschatological positions held among the seventeenth century Congregationalists.

### C. Clarifying Eschatological Terms and Views

The difference between the terms millenarianism and LDG has been far from clear in the secondary literature. Nuttall, for instance, chose to speak in terms of degrees of millenarianism. At least one author has suggested a similar conflation, but one made up of different forms of LDG, altogether. Further complicating matters is the unhelpful term “radical” which has been variously pinned to these categories, and even more so to the Fifth Monarchy Men. No small part of the problem of terminology

---

27 Liu, Discord in Zion; Toon, Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel; Ball, A Great Expectation; Gura, A Glimpse of Sion’s Glory; Smith, “The Pragmatic Puritan Eschatology of John Owen.”

28 Nuttall, Visible Saints, p. 146.

29 Dallison, “Latter-Day Glory in the Thought of Thomas Goodwin.”

arises from the fact that, apart from the self-labeling Fifth Monarchists, these terms were not used extensively or uniformly in their historical context. Even among Congregationalist contemporaries like Thomas Goodwin, Jeremiah Burroughs, John Cotton, and Owen, there were both similarities and differences in their eschatological interpretations. But these similarities and differences were usually spoken, not in terms of broad labels, but of differences on specific eschatological issues: e.g., the nature of the kingdom, interpretation of key apocalyptic scriptures (especially in Daniel and Revelation), the meaning of the millennium, God’s intentions with the Jewish people, identity of the Antichrist, eschatological “signs,” interpreting providence, the spread of the gospel — and, of course, the timing and sequence of all of these matters in the scheme of the last-days. Each Puritan figure judged these (and smaller details) differently. And yet, partly for the ease of historical analyses and discussion, the categories of millenarian and LDG are useful, both for what these views share and how they differ.

Both millenarian and LDG views of the last days can be described with the terms expectant, watchful, hopeful, and terrestrial. That is, both views claimed to be nearing ever-closer to the next phase of God’s redemptive plan, whether that be a millennium or a day of LDG. Certain signs and providential turns were to precede this next phase; and, it was thought, many of those foreshadowing circumstances were already taking place in England’s Revolution and Protectorate periods. Both views held that this next phase was to be a hopeful development for God’s people as Christ’s reign would more clearly manifest itself on

---

31 The most thorough analysis of the variations and possible classifications of seventeenth century British eschatological thought is Ball, A Great Expectation. See also the essay, Crawford Gribben, “Millennialism,” in Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Reformed Puritanism, Haykin and Jones, eds., pp. 83-98.

32 Unfortunately, the differences between the two eschatologies have been overly-minimized even in the most standard works: e.g., Lamont, Godly Rule; Gribben, The Puritan Millennium.
earth. Therefore, both views have a terrestrial or earthly aspect to their expectancy. Indeed, there is much that the millenarian and LDG views share in common. However, there are also stark differences between the two.

For millenarians like Goodwin, Rev. 20 spoke of a future 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth; thus the millennium was to be preceded by a visible coming of Christ to earth. Only after the millennium would the consummation or eschaton come. It is anachronistic to speak of this view as premillennialist but that is essentially what it is, even if seventeenth century millenarians were generally more likely to assign dates to prophetic events than today’s mainstream premillennialists. Generally, they were also more likely to affix dates to biblical prophecies than their LDG counterparts. In the LDG view, of which Owen was an important representative, emphasis was laid upon the growing, building, expanding, advancing nature of the kingdom of Christ. Christ’s rule was to be progressively manifested not through his visible, bodily coming to earth, but by the spread of the gospel in the world, the restoration of NT ecclesiology, and the peaceful success of God’s ways in the world. Following the interpretive direction of Thomas Brightman, such changes were to happen gradually. Or, in Owen’s own words, the fullness of the “kingdom of Christ” was to come not by a total “destruction” of “the nations,” but by a “new moulding of them.”

---

33 It should be noted at this point that in a work usually attributed to Thomas Goodwin, A Glimpse of Sion’s Glory (1641), there is an unusual view of Christ ruling the earth during the Millennium not from earth but from heaven (p. 70). However, Lawrence makes a convincing case, however, that there is not sufficient evidence to attribute this work to Goodwin (“Thomas Goodwin and the Puritan Project”). Whomever the author, A Glimpse of Sion’s Glory provides one of many eschatological options in the seventeenth century, even if a very rare one.

34 Grif ñ on offers a helpful caution about the dangers of anachronisms in the history of eschatology: “Apocalyptic beliefs remained in a state of flux throughout the seventeenth century and each writer must be read in his or her own right without bringing to bear upon him or her the eschatological expectations which succeeding centuries have accumulated” (The Puritan Millennium, p. 32).


36 “The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth” (1649), in Works, 8:257.
present age and this latter-day was one of degree rather than kind. Only after this age of LDG would Christ return bodily for the final judgment and the consummation of all things. Again, anachronistic as it may be, it is roughly this view that has since come to be known as postmillennialism, even if in the seventeenth century this eschatology was far more connected with civil government and the interpretation of providence than most of today’s postmillennialists would allow. These were the main eschatological options among the Congregationalist Puritans.

With these introductory matters out of the way, attention must now turn to identifying the main features of LDG eschatology in general and specifically in Owen’s thought, especially through his Parliamentary sermons of the 1640s and 1650s. Only after a thorough analysis of Owen’s eschatology in the Revolutionary years will we stand in good position to compare it with the eschatology of his post-Restoration sermons and determine whether or how Owen remained consistent in such different circumstances. Further, a thoroughly contextual analysis at the outset will also demonstrate the eschatological backdrop to ecclesiological debates, the national church, liberty, and political issues – not least the execution of King Charles I.

II. The Major Eschatological Themes

A helpful breakdown of the key features of Owen’s eschatology can be found in a paragraph that the Savoy Assembly added to the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) for their formulation of the Savoy Declaration of Faith (SDF). It reads:

... we expect that in the latter days,

37 See Keith Mathison, Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1999) where Owen’s LDG eschatology is suggested to be an important antecedent to the development of postmillennialism (p. 42).

38 The majority of Owen’s pre-1660 (Parliamentary) sermons are found in Works, vol. 8.

39 Owen’s post-Restoration sermons are found in Works, vol. 9 (except for “Sermon 16” which was preached in 1649) and in vol. 17:492-599.
The Coming of the Kingdom: Eschatology

- antichrist being destroyed,
- the Jews called,...
- the adversaries of the kingdom of his dear Son broken,
- the churches of Christ being enlarged,
- and edified through a free and plentiful communication of light and grace, shall enjoy in this world a more quiet, peaceable and glorious condition than they have enjoyed.\(^{40}\)

Very similar (and sometimes exact) descriptions of the primary elements of the last days are given in close to a dozen sections of Owen’s *Works*.\(^{41}\) This kind of quick-list of eschatological expectations seems to be fairly unique with him.\(^{42}\) In these descriptions he suggests as few as three and as many as seven items that are expected for the latter-days. For instance, in a 1651 sermon he speaks of the “appointed time” when God “will bring forth the kingdom of the Lord Christ unto more glory and power than in former days.”\(^{43}\) Not identically but clearly overlapping with the list in the SDF, Owen suggests six promises pertaining to this period of LDG:

\(^{40}\) SDF, 22.5 (bullet points added).

\(^{42}\) Incidentally, this paragraph concerning the latter-days in the SDF (22.5) may, by itself, say something about Owen’s unique role in parts of the SDF’s authorship since he so similarly, and not infrequently, describes the last days in his own writings. Perhaps future research will explore other linguistic connections between the Savoy documents and Owen’s *Works*, and thereby provide possible examples for Andrew Thomson’s summary of the Assembly’s daily work: “A committee, in which Owen and Goodwin evidently bore the burden of the duties, prepared a statement of doctrine each morning, which was laid before the Assembly, discussed, and approved” (“Life of Dr. Owen,” in *Works*, 1:lxix).

Reformed and Reforming

- Fulness of peace unto the gospel and [its] professors;
- Purity and beauty of ordinances and gospel worship;
- Multitudes of converts, many persons, yea, nations;
- The full casting out and rejecting of all will-worship [Arminianism], and their attendant abominations [Laudian worship];
- Professed subjection of the nations throughout the whole world unto the Lord;
- A most glorious and dreadful breaking of all that rise in opposition unto him.44

It is essential to note that many of these similar lists of LDG expectations appear in Owen’s post-Restoration writings; several, in fact, were written in the 1680 and 1684 publications of his *Exposition of Hebrews*. These and other similar descriptions of LDG tenets will be referred to throughout this chapter. But one conclusion can already be established from this simple fact that Owen so repeatedly and similarly lists the identifying features of his latter-day expectations: the main theses of his eschatology clearly remained intact throughout his life. He may have adjusted his expectations about the nearness of this eschatological age, and the tenor or feel of his eschatology may have morphed through the various upheavals of later decades, but it is clear that the basic content of his eschatological expectations never faltered even through very different political-ecclesiastical circumstances.45 This will be further demonstrated as the chapter progresses.

In what follows, six categories of LDG expectation will be used as springboards into Owen’s treatment of the categories. Each of the six categories will also provide opportunity to observe the eschatological orientation to several aspects of England’s reformation.

45 This thesis will become even clearer as these eschatological theses are unfolded from Owen’s *Works* in the rest of this chapter.
A. The Latter Days

An earlier paragraph in the same chapter of the SDF added to the WCF the language of a “visible kingdom in this world.” Small and innocuous as it may seem, it represented more specificity than WCF’s eschatology, but not so much specificity that either millenarianism or LDG views were threatened. Millenarians like Goodwin would have, of course, completely agreed with this phrase, but interpreted it differently than those of the LDG belief. Both views agreed on some kind of silver age before the golden age of the New Heaven and New Earth. For Goodwin, the visible and terrestrial nature of Christ’s kingdom was to come only incrementally between the first and second coming of Christ; but with the return of Christ to earth this kingdom would manifest itself immediately, substantially, universally, and undeniably.

On the other hand, Owen and others of the LDG view would have, again, emphasized the progressively-permeating visibility of the kingdom in the world through a spiritual and providential work of Christ. Owen believed that this divine kingdom was inaugurated at Christ’s first advent; thus, he can speak of the kingdom or even the “last days” as terms generally representing the span between the two advents of Christ. But the kingdom is also “frequently in the Scripture compared to growing things — small in the beginning and at first appearance, but increasing by degrees unto glory and perfection.” The church’s success and influence in the world was to have various peaks and valleys.

---

46 SDF, 22.2.
47 Owen is at times openly and rather forcefully critical of the millenarian exegesis of Rev. 20. For example in his *Exposition of Hebrews* he writes, “The coming of Christ to reign here on earth a thousand years is, if not a groundless opinion, yet so dubious and uncertain as not to be admitted a place in the analogy of faith to regulate our interpretation of Scripture in places that may fairly admit of another application” (*Exposition of Hebrews*, in *Works*, 20:154).
48 See Sermon 26, “Perilous Times” (1676), in *Works*, 9:322. It is worth noting, however, when later commenting on Heb. 1:1 Owen insists that the term “last days” in Scripture does not refer to the “whole time of the gospel” (*Exposition of Hebrews*, in *Works*, 20:11).
throughout its history, but in the latter-day there would be an exponential increase of glory and purity. This eschatological age was understood as a specific, distinct, and future period; and yet, even if paradoxically, it would be “brought in several ages” in the LDG view.\(^5\)

Increasingly so through the 1640s and into the 1650s, proponents of both expectant eschatologies believed that the circumstances of their present age were indeed the first-fruits of this eschatological phase of God’s redemptive history. In fact, Owen began the Preface to his earliest ecclesiological work, The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished (1643), on this eschatological theme:

The glass of our lives seems to run and keep pace with the extremity of time. The end of those “ends of the world” which began with the gospel is doubtless coming upon us. He that was instructed what should be till time should be no more, said it was ἐσχάτη ὥρα, the last hour, in his time. Much sand cannot be behind, and Christ shakes the glass; many minutes of that hour cannot remain ....\(^5\)

The belief that the church stood at the precipice of a great eschatological phase was based on a mix of exegetical, theological, and practical arguments — the latter being mostly the interpretation of providence.\(^5\) The interpretations of Scripture and providence were, in fact, mingled. Owen looked to passages like Rev. 11:15 — “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and his Christ” (KJV) — and, in 1652, still


compared it optimistically with the recent affairs in England.\footnote{“Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power” (1652), in \textit{Works}, 8:388.} From Owen’s perspective, in England’s civil wars God had blessed godly desires for reform with victories over an unrighteous king, including his difficult but necessary execution in 1648.\footnote{We will return later in this chapter to the regicide, and then more carefully consider Owen’s assessment of it.} Though in varying degrees and with varying views, there was a general increased interest in the liberty of conscience coinciding in an uneasiness with England’s past demands for conformity.\footnote{See “Righteous Zeal Encouraged by Divine Protection” (1648), in \textit{Works}, 8:147ff; \textit{passim}.} Though the Westminster Assembly and Parliament had a famously difficult and lengthy time coming to consensus on the specific parameters for a new church settlement throughout the mid- to late-1640s, the Assembly itself was an indication of the national desire for ecclesiastical reforms and a uniting of “the godly.”\footnote{See “Vision of Unchangeable, Free Mercy,” in \textit{Works}, 8:16, 328; \textit{passim}. See also the “Preface” to the SDF, p. vi.} The Laudian form of church with its Arminian soteriology was losing out to the growing cry for “further reformation.”

In all of these events, Owen could say to Parliament, “God” was “secretly entwining the interest of Christ with yours.”\footnote{“Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power,” in \textit{Works}, 8:381.} As in many places in his writings, his sermons during the civil wars especially demonstrate his belief in the need to interpret providence. His dedication to Lord Fairfax in the publication of a 1648 sermon is a prime example.\footnote{“Deliverance of Essex,” in \textit{Works}, 8:72-126.} The recent victory of Parliament’s army in Essex county proved, according to Owen, that God had “made you the instrument of that deliverance and peace,” which “we do enjoy,” that victory, alongside “your former undertakings,” give “ample testimony of the continuance of God’s presence with you in your army, having stopped the mouths of many gainsayers.”\footnote{“Deliverance of Essex,” in \textit{Works}, 8:73-74.}
This interpretation of providence and related predictions about the future may be fairly criticized today, but as a work of intellectual history it is not the purpose of this chapter to evaluate the epistemological/theological shape of Owen’s eschatology; only to better understand it in its context. For Owen, such a circumstantial approach to eschatological interpretation is nothing more than obeying the scriptural principle that Christians should be “watchful” and “not asleep.” It is simply attempting to determine which scriptural promises had already been fulfilled and which remained. And Owen was far from alone in this approach to end-time interpretation. In fact, it was far from limited to millenarian or LDG eschatologies — those fascinated with interpreting providence ranged from the rather stayed Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford to the Arminian John Goodwin, to even the unorthodox thinkers James Nayler and John Biddle. Oliver Cromwell also expressed frequent and great interest in the intersection of biblical prophecy and present circumstances, writing to the avid student of apocalyptic thought in New England, John Cotton: “What is the Lord a-doing? What prophecies are now fulfilling?”

In the 1640s and 1650s, eschatological expectancy was in the air, so to speak. As were others, Owen was optimistic that the latter-day had begun (or was beginning) to dawn. It seemed that
many scriptural promises, such as the downfall of Antichrist, were beginning to be fulfilled.

B. Antichrist Destroyed

A specific expectation for the latter-day was that Antichrist would be fully destroyed either within or just preceding the eschatological kingdom. Both the WCF and SDF followed the magisterial reformers in stating that the “Pope of Rome ... is that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition.” Owen does not disagree with this — indeed, he makes many statements directly equating the papacy with Antichrist. But, as Hill points out, in the mid-seventeenth century this issue was often more nuanced than a simple equation between Pope and Antichrist. Owen is a case-in-point. He seems to consistently prefer the adjective “antichristian” to the noun “antichrist.” The Roman papacy typified what was antichristian, while many rulers, nations, beliefs, and practices were antichristian. Tyranny, persecution, idolatry, and ceremonial worship were all part of the “whole antichristian fabric.” Such antichristian elements were to be found in the “Beast” and also his “tail.” In the mid- to late-1640s this language of “Beast” and “tail” more than hinted at Archbishop Laud and King Charles I, placing them within that broader “antichristian fabric” which was being torn down by God. Owen believed that the Long Parliament had been called to finish Christ’s work of “dissolving the power of a hierarchical tyranny of ecclesiastical affairs, and abolishing the popish, newly-

---

65 WCF, 26.6; SDF, 26.4.
68 “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:180.
invented, antichristian rites,” and “restoring the privileges of the Christian people.”

For Owen, the “further reformation” of the British Isles was now foreseeable because of an eschatological reality—or at least a potential eschatological reality. All signs pointed in the direction of God completing the Reformation by ushering in a new age. The two were inseparable. The “reformation of England,” he predicted in 1646, “shall be more glorious than of any nation in the world, being carried on neither by might nor power, but only by the Spirit of the Lord ....” Such a statement is not mere hyperbole for the purpose of motivating an embattled Parliament; neither is it meant to be overly critical of the first reformers. The belief is grounded simply in an eschatological expectation.

This apocalyptic basis for “further reformation” was a motif articulated by his contemporaries as well. Goodwin, in his commentary on Revelation, for instance, believed that a newly begun “second reformation” was taking place in the Commonwealth. The doctrine of a visible church with regenerate, volitional membership was “belonging to the time of this latter age” and “this work of a second reformation.” Michael Lawrence remarkably, but appropriately, suggested that for Goodwin this “new reformation ... would go as far beyond the Genevan reformation, as the former had the Roman church.” This was prophesied in Rev. 11, Goodwin believed. Thus, the political and ecclesiastical dimensions in mid-seventeenth century England were inseparable. And an expectant eschatology played no small role in tying the two together.

---

71 This quote is from the Latin dedication to Owen’s sermon “Vision of Unchangeable, Free Mercy” (1646), cited from Toon, God’s Statesman, p. 20 (his translation).


74 Lawrence, “Thomas Goodwin and the Puritan Project,” p. 113.

75 Goodwin, of Thomas Goodwin, 3:82; passim.
The Coming of the Kingdom: Eschatology

The primary identifying marker of all that is antichristian was the persecution of the church. This, according to Owen, “is the great discovery of these days.” It is “the peculiar light of this generation ... which the Lord hath made to his people” that of “the mystery of civil and ecclesiastical tyranny.” The “Antichristian interest, interwoven and coupled together, in civil and spiritual things, into a state opposite to the kingdom of the Lord Jesus” was now “unraveling” before their eyes. And in statements such as these, the eschatological orientation to the themes which have occupied the previous chapters becomes apparent: politics, a national church, liberty, not coercion, and free scriptural worship were not just worthy ideals or concerns necessary for “further reformation,” but the by-products of the eschatological fulfillment of Antichrist’s destruction. Whatever was “framed to interest of Antichrist” would be overthrown: kings and bishops, constitutions and churches.

C. The Jews Called

Owen believed that the overthrow of Antichrist would coincide with a restoration of the Jewish people. Their “calling” was of prime importance for the preparation of the LDG: “what kingdom soever the Lord Christ will advance in the world, and exercise amongst his holy ones, the beginning of it must be with the Jews.” This eschatological promise was as clear and paramount as any: “I dare say there is not any promise anywhere of raising up a kingdom unto the Lord Christ in this world, but it is either expressed or clearly intimated that the beginning of it must be with the Jews ....

---

76 “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in Works, 8:274.
77 “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in Works, 8:274.
78 Works, 8:255 (see also pp. 268ff).
79 See, for example, “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in Works, 8:266-67.
80 “Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power,” in Works, 8:375.
81 “Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power,” in Works, 8:375.
The question of the future of the Jewish people was a matter of major debate in the mid-seventeenth century, and many interrelated issues were in play. As such, this aspect of the LDG-belief will require some background before proceeding to Owen’s beliefs. Since 1290, the Jewish people had been barred from England. For some in the seventeenth century, the interest to readmit the Jews to England and/or open trade with Jews on the continent was merely about stimulating England’s struggling commerce. For others, it was in the interest of liberty and toleration to allow them to return to England. Thomas Barlow, Owen’s former tutor at Oxford, was cautiously willing to consider their immigration, but with a more conservative view of toleration in general, he suggested several limitations for their liberty in England.  

But for most, there were theological, and specifically eschatological, reasons for the readmission of the Jews to England: their national conversion being foretold in passages such as Rom. 11. As for the nature and timing of the Jews’ restoration there were also important differences among Owen’s contemporaries. In Mede’s estimation, the conversion of the Jews would come as miraculously as Saul’s conversion on the Road to Damascus — i.e., with a visible, glorious appearing of Christ. Thus, “there would be no necessity for gathering the Jews to one particular place.” Later millenarians, however, built upon Mede’s interpretation and anticipated that this Saul-like conversion could happen only in England. Thus, there was, for many, a strong nationalistic basis for the readmission of the Jews. They had come to see England as a new Jerusalem or a new Zion. It was an elect, covenanted nation, and therefore would function as something of an epicenter in the coming eschatological age of blessing. Some, such as the Baptist

---

82 For specifics, see Toon, “The Question of Jewish Immigration,” in Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel, p. 123.
83 Jue, Heaven Upon Earth, pp. 192-93.
84 See A Glimpse of Sion’s Glory (1641), in Works of Thomas Goodwin, 12:66. Of course many settlers in New England conversely believed that their land was to be a “New Canaan,” and thus had unique reasons to welcome the Jews to their shores (see DeJong, As the Waters Cover the Sea, pp. 21-33). Conversely, some New Englanders such as Cotton remained remarkably English-centric, and viewed New England’s
Henry Jessey, were willing to forecast a date by which this would take place.  

Others envisioned conversion of the Jews as something less spectacular and immediate than a Damascus Road experience; rather their redemption would “only come about by preaching and this could not begin until the Jews were in England to hear sermons.” For Cromwell, there were unifying purposes for the interest of the Jews in England. His desire to “unite the godly” included not just Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists, but also envisioned a multitude of Jews newly redeemed in Christ. This would fulfill those many NT Scriptures which speak of Jew and Gentile being one in Christ. The Jews’ readmission to England was seen as an essential part of cooperating with God’s eschatological plans for a time of unprecedented unity, purity, peace, and kingdom growth.

Incidentally, the eschatological basis for Jewish immigration at the time was cherished among some Jews as well, though for different reasons. Manasseh ben Israel, the well-known Dutch Rabbi, wrote in 1650 that Messiah would not appear until the Jewish people had been scattered to all the corners of the earth. Their return to England was the only puzzle piece missing to complete the picture. Thus, though there were different bases between English Protestants and Dutch Jews for the readmission of the Jews to England, the goal was shared and a partnership grew.

Puritan experiment as primarily a model in service to England. See Joseph Jung Uk Chi, “‘Forget not the wombe that bare you, and the brest that gave you sucke’: John Cotton’s Sermons on Canticles and Revelation and His Apocalyptic Vision for England” (PhD diss., Univ. of Edinburgh, 2009), chap. 2.


See Morrill, Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution, p. 154.

Menasseh ben Israel, Hoc Est, Spes Israelis (1650). The important work was quickly translated into English and printed in England as The Hope of Israel (1650).

See Yosef Kaplin, Richard Popkin, and Henry Mechoulan, eds., Manasseh Ben Israel and his World (Leiden: Brill, 1989). The most thorough account of the
In November 5, 1655 these partnerships were more fully realized when ben Israel published his “Humble Addresses,” officially pleading with Cromwell for the readmission of the Jews to England with specific liberties. A committee from the Council of State met at Whitehall almost immediately to discuss the proposal and make a recommendation to the Lord Protector. Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Joseph Caryl, Owen, and others were in attendance for some or all of the meetings. The Whitehall Conference reached no agreement on ben Israel’s petition, despite its two months of meetings and Cromwell’s strongest urgings. Owen may have been on the quieter side of the Conference’s discussions, since his views are not represented in the rather thorough extant records. Goodwin’s view, however, is clear: the Jews should be admitted, but not permitted to write or speak against Christianity, nor to violate the Christian Sabbath. Yet, it was hoped that a return to England would expose them to sober Christians and the gospel, and thus, lead to their conversion.

It is worth pausing here to recall that the deliberations at Whitehall have much in common with pictures painted in previous chapters. The view of liberty outlined at Whitehall, not surprisingly, is consistent with the various constitutional-confessional proposals discussed in Chapter 3. Owen, Goodwin, Nye, and Caryl played no small role in the efforts toward a Cromwellian church settlement. The politico-theological meeting at Whitehall about the future of the Jews was typical in that decade for Owen & Co. — it was simply one of many similar correspondence and partnerships between ben Israel and several English Protestants is David Katz, Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England, 1603-1655 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

90 For the text, see Katz, Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England, p. 194.

91 See the invitation to Owen from Henry Lawrence in Toon, ed., The Correspondence of John Owen, pp. 88-89. For a record of the proceedings see Calendar of State Papers Domestic, 1655-1656, pp. 23ff, and Henry Jessey, A Narrative of the Late Proceeds at White-Hall, Concerning the Jews (1656).

92 It is perhaps for this reason that Griffiths entertained the possibility that Owen was not in attendance at all (Redeem the Time, pp. 118-19). The Calendar of State Papers Domestic, 1655-1656, however, shows that he was (p. 52).
conferences. However, the eschatological backdrop to the questions of the Jews is integral and obvious with the Whitehall debates; and yet, eschatology was not peculiar to this meeting or topic. What is becoming clearer in this chapter is that eschatology informed, influenced, and intertwined itself with many matters in the Puritan Revolution: e.g., Christian unity, national ecclesiology, civil politics, liberty, gospel-proclamation, etc. Eschatological hope was a primary motivation for committees, debates, legislation, and publications.

In light of the close and frequent working of the same men in the 1650s, it might seem safe to assume, as many historical-theologians have, that “Owen’s opinions” of ben Israel’s proposal must have been “similar to” those of his close companions in the Whitehall Conference. But there may be more to the fact that neither Owen’s convictions, nor his arguments, were born out in the Conference accounts. As has been touched upon in earlier chapters, his presence in other political-ecclesiastical committees, whether because of personality or reputation, rather conspicuously and consistently stood out among his peers. So, why was he unusually quiet at the Whitehall meetings? Was Owen in fact favorable to Jews’ readmission to England, as basically all scholars have assumed? The question deserves to be asked rather than assumed.

While there are many references in Owen’s works to the apocalyptic expectation of the restoration of the Jews, Owen is not nearly as specific as any of his contemporaries listed above. To my knowledge, Owen never speaks a word about the Jews’ readmission to England, precisely as such. He instead, more generally and theologically, writes of the Jews’ future restoration,

---

93 Griffiths, Redeem the Time, p. 119 (also pp. 120-21). Similarly Toon: “Whilst no description exists as to what exactly was Owen’s point of view, it is very probable that he favoured their entry on a strictly controlled basis” (Toon, God’s Statesman, p. 97). Also: Orme, Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Religious Connexions of Dr. John Owen, p. 160; Daniel Neal, The History of the Puritans, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1844), 2:159; Williams, “God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen,” p. 149.
calling, glory; their recalling, and their re-implanting into the vine.\textsuperscript{94} But in such references, there is no mention of England, its present or future immigration policies, nor any specific hypothesis about where and how the conversion of Jews would take place. In fact, Owen at times acknowledges his uncertainty about the details surrounding their future: “What the Lord Christ will do with them, and by them, is not so clear; this is certain, that their return shall be marvellous, glorious — as life from the dead.”\textsuperscript{95} Of course, this is not conclusive evidence that Owen was opposed, politically speaking, to the readmission of the Jews to England. But it does likely indicate that he did not attach the theological, and specifically eschatological, significance to England’s role geographically and politically, as many of his contemporaries did. If Owen was in favor of the readmission of the Jews to England, it cannot be conclusively determined either by his extant writings or by the accounts of the Whitehall Conference.

Owen’s understanding of their future “restoration” is that of a restoration to the gospel, to divine blessings, and possibly even to Jerusalem. The latter of these aspects of Jewish restoration deserves more consideration. In 1657, Owen foresees that “when the Jews shall be converted, they shall be a national church as England is.”\textsuperscript{96} It would be difficult to imagine a national Jewish church within England, and thus unlikely that this is what he intends. In his Exposition of Hebrews he is even more geographically-emphatic about the Jewish future:

... it is granted that there shall be a time and season, during the continuance of the kingdom of the Messiah in this world, wherein the generality of the nation of the Jews, all the world over, shall be called and effectually brought unto the knowledge of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ; with which mercy they shall also receive


\textsuperscript{95} “Discourse V” (1676), in Several Practical Cases of Conscience Resolved, in Works, 9:375.

\textsuperscript{96} Of Schism (1657), in Works, 13:193.
The Coming of the Kingdom: Eschatology

deliverance from their captivity, restoration unto their own land, with a blessed, flourishing, and happy condition therein ....

Elsewhere Owen attests that the “bringing in of the kingdom of Christ” will entail the “bringing home of his ancient people to be one fold with the fullness of the Gentiles — raising up the tabernacle of David, and building it as in the days of old ....” He then proceeds to suggest certain “hindrances” which must be removed before this can happen. One is “moral:” the “idolatry of the Gentile worshippers” must be removed. The other is “real:” the streams of “the great river Euphrates,” referring to Rev. 16:12, presently “rage so high that there is no passage for the kings of the east [the Jews] to come over” and return to their home. There is no doubt some measure of symbolism here. Owen later equates the Euphrates with “Turkish power;” thus, he speaks of an obstacle, not literally of water, but of the Turkish government. There is, however, no indication that he intends symbolism about the goal and destination — namely, God “bringing home ... his ancient people.” Then they shall have “peace within their borders.” They “are to be ‘caput imperil;’” the “head and seat” of Christ’s “empire must be amongst them;” they “are the ‘saints of the Most High,’ mentioned by Daniel ....”

---

97 Exercitations of ... Hebrews, in Works, 18:434. See also, p. 445.
98 “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in Works, 8:266.
99 Rev. 16:12 reads, “The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east” (ESV).
100 “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in Works, 8:266-67. See the similar, and much more lengthy, treatment of this verse in Thomas Brightman, A Revelation of the Apocalypse (1615), pp. 542-46.
101 This phrase is found in another sermon where Owen speaks of Rev. 16:12 in the same way (“Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power,” in Works, 8:376 [emphasis added]).
102 “Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power,” in Works, 8:375. Two qualifications should be made at this point. (1) Owen did not believe that the Jews (redeemed, Christian Jews) would rebuild the temple and reestablish Levitical sacrifices and ceremonies. Their worship shall be Christian, gospel worship — no different than what the New Covenant provides and prescribes for Gentile believers anywhere else in the world (see the extended discussion in Exercitations of ... Hebrews, in Works, 18:435-45). (2) Owen did not believe that Israel continued to be a “holy
Owen’s view of the future of the Jews seems rather unique among the other examples of expectant eschatology in his day. His exegetical basis for the Jews’ return to Jerusalem may be questioned, but on the whole Owen is less speculative, more exegetically tempered than many of his contemporaries. He readily acknowledges areas of uncertainty, such as where and how the Jews will be converted, and what will come as a result of their conversion. Yet, he remains firm and consistent in his belief that there will be a redemptive future for Israel. If there is also to be a geographical connection to the Jews’ redemption, Owen seems to envision that taking place in their land, not in England. In doing so, he is aligned with Thomas Brightman who, decades before, wrote a controversial work on the Jews’ return to their land. Brightman’s influence on the general LDG interpretations of mid-seventeenth century are unmistakable, but not many followed this aspect of Brightman’s eschatological vision. Owen never names Brightman as an influence on his eschatology. This, however, is not unusual in the typical use of sources and quotations in

land” in the New Covenant as it was throughout of the OT (see “Vision of Unchangeable, Free Mercy,” in Works, 8:20-21; 9:247).

For example, see the remarkably English-centric scriptural interpretations in Thomas Goodwin, An Exposition of Revelation (1641). Owen’s more tempered approach can also be seen in the fact that his exegesis of passages in Revelation and Daniel are not as intricately speculative as other LDG writers such as Thomas Brightman, Apocalypsis Apocalypseos (1611), and John Cotton, The Pouring Out of the Seven Vials (1642); The Churches Resurrection or the Opening of the 20th Chapter of Revelation (1642); An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of Revelation (1655). For an overview of the similarities and differences within the LDG view, see Toon, “The Latter-Day Glory,” pp. 23-41.

Thomas Brightman, Shall They Return to Jerusalem Again? (1615). This belief is also scattered through Brightman’s writings. See The Works of that Famous, Reverend, and Learned Divine, Mr. Tho. Brightman (1644).

This was also the view of the Congregationalist William Strong (d. 1654), who worked with Owen and others on The Humble Proposals (1652). See William Strong, XXXI Select Sermons (1654), p. 286.

Owen only makes one passing comment of appreciation for any preceding works on eschatology. In the writings of “Bucer, Calvin, Martyr, Beza,” he writes, there is “benefit,” and students of Scripture should “always will bless God for the assistance he gave them in their great and holy works, and in the benefit which they receive by their labours” (Causes, Ways, and Means, in Works, 4:229).
The Coming of the Kingdom: Eschatology

Owen’s day; thus, it would not be surprising if Owen leaned upon Brightman without citing him.\footnote{Some Owen scholars have looked to the auction catalogue of the posthumous sale of Owen’s library as a means of identifying possible influences (e.g., Rehnman, Divine Discourse; Trueman, Claims of Truth; John Owen). However, Crawford Gribben more recently has warned against the temptation, suggesting that the auctioneer, Edward Millington, was adept at adding to the personal libraries of well known individuals in order to maximize broader sales. See Crawford Gribben, “John Owen, Renaissance Man? The Evidence of Edward Millington’s Bibliotheca Oweniana (1684), in The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology, Kapic and Jones, eds., pp. 97-109.}

Scholars have assumed that though there is no record of Owen’s assessment of the Whitehall Council and its petition, his position had to be in line with the Council’s outcome. And as for the suggested parameters for their liberty, especially as represented by Goodwin at the Council, he most likely was completely in line. But as for the question of Jewish immigration into England, surprisingly, we have no clear indication.\footnote{Previous examinations of Owen’s eschatology seem to have overlooked this, assuming too quickly that his firm belief in the redemption of the Jews necessitated a belief in their readmission to England. Owen’s own words, however, do not bear this out.} In light of this, it would be no less speculative than the direction of previous scholarship to entertain the possibility that the records of the Whitehall proceedings suggest an unusually quiet Owen, who simply had no dog in the fight of the Jews’ readmission to England.\footnote{It will not do to assume that Owen’s treatment of the future of the Jews in his writings and sermons is consciously theoretical, not practical — and that being the reason that his treatment of the future of the Jews never addresses an immigration to England. As we shall see, in his pleas for the propagation of the gospel in foreign lands, Owen was very specific and practical about how England’s rulers could best bring about that eschatological hope.} At the very least, it is safe to assume that he did not have a \textit{theological} argument for the proposed change of immigration policy as others attempted.

Regardless of the geography of the Jews being called, for Owen, it was an eschatological promise that was to be pursued, prayed about, and watched for.
D. The Adversaries of the Kingdom Broken

We have already observed that the destruction of Antichrist was an ecclesiastical, political, and eschatological expectation. Heavily related to the defeat of antichristian rule was the belief that in preparation for the LDG there would be a “shaking” and “translating” of nations and kingdoms.

1. Shaking and Translating of Nations. Though this language was used by other Parliamentary preachers in the late-1640s, Owen took Heb. 12:27 as his primary text in a pivotal 1649 Parliamentary sermon. The passage speaks of the future “removal of all things that are shaken — that is, things that have been made — in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain” (ESV). Owen interprets “heaven” and “earth” in the passage not literally but in terms of high and low entities, the former representing kings and nations. Regardless, it all needs shaking and translating: “All the present states of the world are cemented together by antichristian lime;” specifically, “papal, antichristian Rome” is a “mysterious thread” running “through all the nations of the west.” In the latter-day, God will “shake” and “translate” these, not by a total “destruction” of political/national entities, but by a “change, translation, and new moulding of them,” according to the “interest of Christ.”

It must be stressed here that Owen is not condemning monarchies in toto; neither is he awaiting an earthly millennial reign of Christ on earth to replace the kingdoms of this world. Rather, “the nations, as nations” will “serve” Christ; therein “the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our

---

110 “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in Works, 8:243-79. It was following this sermon that Owen was first introduced to the quite-impressed Cromwell, who immediately sought to have Owen accompany him to Ireland for an assessment of Trinity College Dublin. This then marked the beginning of their almost-decade-long alliance.

111 “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in Works, 8:257.

112 “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in Works, 8:257.

113 See “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in Works, 8:263.
Lord.”¹¹⁴ This point has often been misunderstood in the secondary literature on Owen.¹¹⁵ In fact, Owen elsewhere plainly insists that “the founding of Zion doth not consist in this or that form of the civil administration of human affairs, there being nothing promised nor designed concerning them.” His concern, rather, is “that they be laid in an orderly subserviency to the common interest of the saints” and Christ’s kingdom.¹¹⁶

Yet, while it will not be a total removal or destruction of nations and governments, their *shaking* and *translation* will be far from subtle or easy. Because Antichrist has “riveted itself into the very fundamentals” of these entities, “no digging or mining” will do; only “an earthquake will cast up the foundations-stones” which Christ will replace.¹¹⁷ With the execution of King Charles only four months in the past, the implications would have been clear to his listeners. Its difficulty was matched only by its apocalyptic implications. Indeed, it was a social and political “earthquake” of greatest proportions, but it was the kind of eschatological “shaking” of which Heb. 12:27 spoke.¹¹⁸ It was God’s doing. And, it was sufficient indication of the dawning of a latter-day.¹¹⁹

Once again, the persecution of and tyranny over “the godly” is central to Owen’s argument. This was the “antichristian lime” mixed into the church and state by the previous regime. But the adversaries of the kingdom of Christ would be broken, as Scripture assured. Further, God was not just “shaking” what is earthly and antichristian, but was also “translating” political

¹¹⁵ Liu, commenting on this very sermon, claimed remarkably that “Owen seemed to believe that in the coming millennium the Gospel was the only and sufficient law of government” (Liu, *Discord in Zion*, p. 66).
¹¹⁶ “God’s Work in Founding Zion, and His People’s Duty Thereupon” (1652), in *Works*, 8:421.
¹¹⁷ “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in *Works*, 8:266.
¹¹⁸ See similar comments in “The Advantage of the Kingdom of Christ in the Shaking of the Kingdoms of the World” (1651), in *Works*, 8:312ff (esp. p. 318).
¹¹⁹ The most thorough study of the eschatological connections to the regicide is Laydon, “The Kingdom of Christ and the Powers of the Earth,” pp. 130-267.
structures according to the interests of the kingdom of Christ and
the church. Owen, therefore, calls on Parliament to recognize
their recent turmoil and present state as nothing less than the
hand of God. Two years later, following the army’s victory at
Worcester, he was making the same plea to the House: “Men are
exceeding unwilling to see and own the hand of God in those
works of his providence which answer not their reasonings,
interests, and expectations;” however, the Lord “will not cease
walking contrary to the carnal reasonings of men, in his mighty
works for the carrying on the interest of the Lord Jesus, until his
hand be seen, owned, and confessed.”¹²⁰

Can we, in fact, conclude from all of this that Owen was
amenable to Charles’ charge of treason and subsequent execution?
An affirmative answer has been hinted at thus far in this chapter,
but the matter now deserves more careful exploration. The
question of Owen’s support for the regicide has been variously
answered ever since Owen preached that now famous (or
infamous) sermon to the Commons on the day following the
king’s beheading.¹²¹ Most of Owen’s early admirers cast blame
only elsewhere. For Orme, Owen preached that day “by
command,” and “no sentiment of the sermon can be construed as
approval of the regicide,” but instead demonstrates a “desire to
keep free and aloof from ... any positive opinion” on the
regicide.¹²² Similarly, Asty’s early biography concluded that
Owen’s “discourse was so modest and inoffensive, that his friends
could make no just exception, nor his enemies take an advantage
of his words another day.”¹²³ But later historical assessments of

¹²⁰ “The Advantage of the Kingdom of Christ in the Shaking of the Kingdoms of
the World,” in Works, 8:320.
¹²¹ “Righteous Zeal Encouraged” (1649), in Works, 8:129-62. Evidence that it was
undeniably controversial is that, not long after Owen’s death in 1683, the University
of Oxford condemned and burned copies of this sermon by their former Vice-
Chancellor. See Richard Greaves, “Owen, John (1616-1683),” in Oxford Dictionary of
¹²² See Orme, Memoirs, pp. 69-70, which is quoted affirmingly by Goold in
Works, 8:128.
the regicide have viewed such conclusions as unfortunate hagiography.\textsuperscript{124} What is the truth of the matter?

2. In Defense of Regicide. Even Owen’s fairly genteel and judicious preface to the sermon’s printing still goes so far as to insist that the “Reconciler of heaven and earth bids us” to “expect the sword to attend his undertakings for and way of making peace.”\textsuperscript{125} The sermon proper is replete with comments about God’s judgment of “false worship, superstition, tyranny, and cruelty”\textsuperscript{126} and divine promises of strength for the righteous servants to execute their duties in times of difficulty, as the title itself (“Righteous Zeal Encouraged”) clearly suggests.\textsuperscript{127} Much has been made by historians about the fact that it was Owen to whom Parliament looked for a sermon in the wake of such a momentous day. However, he and John Cardell had been routinely scheduled for a “fast-day” sermon a full month prior.\textsuperscript{128} Regardless, the gravity of the moment was not lost on Owen, and he is far from ambivalent or cagy in the sermon about the gravity or implications of the previous day’s events.\textsuperscript{129}

Owen never explicitly mentions Charles or what had taken place the day before, but he uses the sin and destruction of the biblical Manasseh as an obvious illustration. When the unrighteous cruelty of a king is only met with the people’s “willing compliance,” both are culpable, says Owen. In the days of Manasseh, the people “did not restrain” the king “in his provoking ways” and both were destroyed.\textsuperscript{130} The implications for England are clear: Parliament had no choice in its dealings with its obstinate king; passivity would have been participation and would have led to the whole nation’s ruin.\textsuperscript{131} It was, then, divine

\textsuperscript{124} See Toon, God’s Statesman, pp. 33-34; Wallace, “The Life and Thought of John Owen to 1660,” p. 175; Griffiths, Redeem the Time, pp. 106-08. Cook was more ambivalent in “A Political Biography of ... John Owen,” pp. 83-92.

\textsuperscript{125} “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:129.

\textsuperscript{126} “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:143.

\textsuperscript{127} “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:149.

\textsuperscript{128} See Journal of the House of Commons, 4:107.

\textsuperscript{129} See “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:130.

\textsuperscript{130} “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:136-37.

\textsuperscript{131} See also “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:138.
mercy which kept them from passivity. For, as Owen wrote in his preface, God “called you forth ... for the rolling up of the nation’s heavens like a scroll, to serve him in your generation in the high places of Armageddon ....”\(^{132}\) Again, the apocalyptic language and eschatological implications are unmistakable.

More could be said about Owen’s support of regicide from this momentous sermon, but what is perhaps actually more important, is what is found in a sermon before the king’s death.

3. Four Months Before. Four months before the king’s trial and execution Owen seems to have hinted at the possible necessity of the regicide.\(^{133}\) Here Owen compares the bondage and deliverance of God’s people in Egypt, and later in Babylon, to the present captivity of the church in England under Charles. He then subtly, but shockingly, offers an application:

When seventy years of captivity expire, Babylon must be ruined, and the Chaldean monarchy quite wasted, that the Jews may return. The church being to be delivered, Haman must be hanged. This you have fully set out [in] Rev. 6:12–17. It is the fall of heathenish tyranny, by the prevailing of the gospel, which you have there described. Rome and Constantinople, Pope and Turk, are preserved for a day and an hour wherein they shall fall, and be no more. If the season of enjoying ordinances and privileges be come to this nation, that the tabernacle of God will be here amongst men; woe be to Cushanites! woe be to Midianites!—open opposers, and secret apostates. They shall not be able to be quiet, nor to prevail; God will not let them rest, nor obtain their purposes. The story of Haman must be acted over again ...

It is almost inconceivable to imagine that Owen is not here making any connection to the Army’s war with the king; that his references to Haman are not allusions to Charles. Surely his words are pregnant and, it turns out, prophetic: “The church being delivered, Haman must be hanged ... The story of Haman must be acted

\(^{132}\) “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:129.

\(^{133}\) “Deliverance of Essex,” in Works, 8:71-126. The exact date of the sermon’s delivery is not known, but its publication was Oct. 5, 1648. The king’s execution was not until Jan. 30, 1649.

\(^{134}\) “Deliverance of Essex,” in Works, 8:107 (emphasis added).
over again ....” Also important is that, a few sentences following the above quote, Owen provides one of his sermonic “uses” (or applications) of the teaching. This typically-puritanical sermonic device was purposefully plain. “Uses” were meant to drive home any implications that may have gotten lost in the preceding exposition. In this case, however, Owen states a “use” with quite an unusual obscurity: “Use. Bring this observation home to the first from this verse [to have faith for divine support in an evil day], and it will give you the use of it.”\textsuperscript{135} In other words, in such days, he could not explicitly say what he meant to say. He only asked his readers to draw their own conclusion based on his (rather obvious but indirect) earlier words.

The printing of this sermon (let alone the preaching of it) was still a full month before Henry Ireton authored \textit{The Remonstrance of the Army}, and thereby abandoned negotiations with Charles.\textsuperscript{136} According to David Farr, it is difficult to know exactly when the idea of regicide was acceptable to Ireton, but there is no indication of it until the crafting of the \textit{Remonstrance}.\textsuperscript{137} Interestingly, Owen and Ireton had become close personal friends by this time.\textsuperscript{138} Thus, Toon rightly suggested, “it is a distinct possibility that the soldier and the divine had discussed between themselves some of the ideas contained in the [Remonstrance].”\textsuperscript{139}


\textsuperscript{136} The “Deliverance of Essex” was published Oct. 5, 1648. The precise date of its actually delivery is unknown, but it could easily have been a month earlier than its publication. On the background to the Army’s \textit{Remonstrance}, see David Farr, \textit{Henry Ireton and the English Revolution} (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006). As David Underdown noted, the \textit{Remonstrance} was “the beginning of the design against the King’s person.” See \textit{Pride’s Purge: Politics in the Puritan Revolution} (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), p. 116.

\textsuperscript{137} Farr, \textit{Henry Ireton and the English Revolution}, pp. 189-92. Of course, the Levellers had called for the king’s trial and execution more than a year before this – e.g., John Lillburne, \textit{Regal Tyranny Discovered} (1647). But this movement should not be confused with the more moderate opinions of Ireton, Cromwell, and Owen. On the differences, see Ian Gentles, John Morrill, and Blair Worden, eds., \textit{Soldiers, Writers, Statesman of the English Revolution} (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998).

\textsuperscript{138} Owen’s appreciation and affection for Ireton can be seen in the sermon Owen preached at Ireton’s funeral: “The Laboring Saint’s Dismission to Rest” (1651), in \textit{Works}, 8:342-63.

\textsuperscript{139} Toon, \textit{God’s Statesman}, p. 33.
But perhaps Toon did not go far enough. Extant evidence points heavily toward Owen’s “Deliverence of Essex” sermon cautiously-yet-publicly suggesting the inevitability and necessity of the king’s execution before any official political document did.

Many finer details are still unknown: whether Owen and Ireton spoke privately of the regicide before Owen’s sermon; whether Ireton’s ideas were influential on the preacher and his sermon; whether Owen’s sermon influenced or motivated Ireton, Fairfax, et al, to action; or perhaps none of the above. What is evident is a tantalizing confluence of religion and politics, sermons and wars, friendships and manifestos; and Owen was in the middle of it all, if not also somewhere out in front of it. It also serves as a historiographical reminder that the public debates and correspondence — such as those between the Levellers and the Army’s leadership — do not always tell the full story. Owen’s Haman sermon and his longtime friendship with Ireton are data that need to be included in the inquiry of influences leading up to Charles’ execution.

As for the interpretation of Owen the man, it is now quite clear that it was not anti-monarchical sentiments which give birth to regicide-support. It was his belief in and scriptural interpretation of the shaking and translating of the kingdoms of this earth to become the kingdoms of Christ, coupled with his belief that Charles’ reign was marked by antichristian tyranny, demanded conformity, persecution, and war. Fierce wars and the victory of the saints were prophesied in Rev. 17 as a foreshadow to

140 Unrelated to the regicide, but quite related to Owen’s relationships with and possible influences upon the MPs, Austin Woolrych noted that parts of Cromwell’s Declaration (1650) “are couched in a pulpit-rhetoric that suggests a clerical hand, perhaps that of Cromwell’s trusted chaplain John Owen.” See Britain in Revolution, p. 473. Also noteworthy, as was noted in Chap. 2, other scholars have considered Owen’s possible influence in the Army’s Agreement of the People (1649).

141 Many scholars have viewed the Levellers as a difficult-but-determinative influence on Ireton for the Remonstrance and regicide. For example: Underdown, Pride’s Purge, pp. 120-26; Clive Holmes, Why Was Charles I Executed? (London: Humbledon Continuum, 2006), pp. 112ff. I am not here suggesting a total reconsideration of the Levellers’ influence, but Owen being included somewhere in recreations of these complex events and players in late-1648.
Thus, the ending to his sermon on the day following the regicide sums up one aspect of his interpretation of the recent events: “this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.” Parliament, however, must also do their part to protect the profession of the gospel and promote the progress of the gospel in the land and beyond. It is there to which we next turn.

**E. The Churches Enlarged**

Another hallmark of the latter-day, according to the SDF, is that the churches will be “enlarged.” When comparing this language with the other similar lists of LDG components in Owen’s *Works*, it is clear that what is envisioned here is an increase of gospel conversions at the end of the age. It also clear from these other LDG descriptions that gospel preaching was to be both *national* and *international* in scope. Simply put, it refers to what some today may call evangelism and missions. Owen roots this mandate in scriptural promise: “Multitudes of converts, many persons, yea, nations” are “clearly promised” in the “bringing forth” of the kingdom of Christ. A connection between expectant eschatology and “sending the gospel” (or mission) has

---

142 For example, see “Advantage of the Kingdom of Christ,” in *Works*, 8:322.


144 See “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in *Works*, 8:154. It is noteworthy that the appendix affixed to the publication of his post-regicide sermon had *promotion of the gospel* and the *protection of the church's worship* as central themes (“Of Tolerance, and the Duty of the Magistrate about Religion,” in *Works*, 8:163-206). That will become more significant in the following sections of this chapter.

been explored in several historical analyses. Owen’s Parliamentary sermons are, in fact, a superb example of this eschatological-missions focus.

In his very first Parliamentary sermon the thirty-year-old Owen focused on the spread of the gospel as both an eschatological promise and a responsibility for England’s rulers to look to the nations. He took for his text Acts 16:9 — “a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and, saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’” Christ’s call in this text to “Stay not in Asia,” Owen believes, was not just for Paul to meet a Macedonian need, but, by implication, for England, and every place where the gospel is known, to go where it is not. Owen then argues his case in several ways.

First, such gospel-sending efforts are part of the church’s further reformation. The church (and nation) must recover, protect, and propagate the gospel, as it should “gospel worship”. Or, in his own words: the “reformation of the doctrine of the gospel” when it is “corrupted with error,” and the reformation of the “worship of God” when it is “collapsed with superstition,” should also include “the first implantation of the gospel” in those without it. Reformation and regeneration are to be pursued “for the same reason” — Christ’s kingdom being made visible in this world. So his people, says Owen, must be concerned not only for the “continuance” of the gospel in their own land, but for the “entrance” of the gospel elsewhere.

Also, Owen argues that this is what Christ intends in “the grace of the new covenant” in general, and in the “breaking forth

---


in these *latter days* especially.\(^{150}\) Now more than ever “all external distinction of places and persons and nations” is “being removed” and “Jesus Christ taketh all nations to be his inheritance ....”\(^{151}\)

Owen then moves to pleas, begging the nation’s ministers “to cast off all by-respects, and to flee to those places where, in all probability, the harvest would be great, and the laborers are few or none at all!”\(^{152}\) While Owen speaks in sweeping global terms, he also specifies the needs closest to home: “O that Wales! O that Ireland! O that France! ... O that every ... part of the world had such ... grace.”\(^{153}\) His sermon ends on the same note, but with even heightened zeal: “O that you would labour to let all the parts of the kingdom taste of the sweetness of your successes, in carrying to them the gospel of the Lord Jesus.”\(^{154}\)

The missionary focus and fervor of the sermon is remarkable. Owen grounded a gospel-sending call in scriptural interpretation, in a broader comprehension of the church’s reformation, and in the eschatological expectation that in the latter-day there would be a kingdom-swell and churches would be “enlarged.”

A few years later, Owen accompanied Cromwell and Fairfax to Ireland to serve as Chaplain to the Army and to investigate the options for Protestant ministerial training and approbation, particularly through Trinity College, Dublin.\(^{155}\) Over the six months that he stayed in Ireland, Owen also maintained a busy schedule of public preaching.\(^{156}\) Between his preaching duties and his work with Trinity College, Owen seems to have been kept at


\(^{155}\) For details, see Toon, *God’s Statesman*, pp. 36-42; Cook, “A Political Biography of ... John Owen,” pp. 99-106.

\(^{156}\) He wrote of his time in Ireland: “being by God’s providence removed for a season from my native soil, attended with more than ordinary weakness and infirmities, separated from my library, burdened with manifold employments, with constant preaching to a numerous multitude of as thirsting a people after the Gospel as ever yet I conversed withal, it sufficeth me that I have obtained this mercy, briefly and plainly to vindicate the truth from mistakes” (*Of The Death of Christ* [1650], in *Works*, 10:479).
some distance from Cromwell’s infamously bloody campaigns against the Irish.\textsuperscript{157} He did not disapprove of the military activity, but his focus was clearly more ministerially minded than militarily. This is evident in his report to Parliament upon his return to London, which again strikes a familiar missionary chord.\textsuperscript{158}

How is it that Jesus Christ is in Ireland only as a lion staining all his garments with the blood of his enemies; and none to hold him out as a lamb sprinkled with his own blood to his friends? Is it the sovereignty and interest of England that is alone to be there transacted? For my part, I see no farther into the MYSTERY of these things but that I could heartily rejoice, that, innocent blood being expiated, the Irish might enjoy Ireland so long as the moon endureth, so that Jesus Christ might possess the Irish.\textsuperscript{159}

Owen had referred to the spiritual needs of Ireland, along with Wales and France, in his first Parliamentary sermon.\textsuperscript{160} But his time in Ireland raised his concerns for that land in particular. Thus, he calls on England’s churches to pray for them, to make provisions for the preaching of the gospel there, and to give practical care for the “poor parentless children that lie begging, starving, rotting in the streets.”\textsuperscript{161} Yet, once again, Owen rooted his appeal not primarily in compassion for the hurting and lost, but in the divine promises that “the kingdom of Christ” will be propagated and established among the multitudes.\textsuperscript{162} It was once again a specifically eschatological logic. As the title of the sermon suggests, in the neglect of gospel-sending efforts, England had “staggered” at the divine “promises.”\textsuperscript{163}

\textsuperscript{157} See Cook, “A Political Biography of ... John Owen,” p. 100.
\textsuperscript{158} “The Steadfastness of the Promises, and the Sinfulessness of Staggering” (1650), in \textit{Works}, 8:207-41.
\textsuperscript{159} “The Steadfastness of the Promises,” in \textit{Works}, 8:235.
\textsuperscript{161} “The Steadfastness of the Promises,” in \textit{Works}, 8:237.
\textsuperscript{162} “The Steadfastness of the Promises,” in \textit{Works}, 8:216.
It is, however, important to hold such humane sentiments alongside everything else that has already been said about Owen’s expectations of the LDG. Antichrist needed to be defeated in Ireland as much as anywhere; and Cromwell’s army was (even if an unfortunate) a necessary instrument for breaking the adversaries of Christ’s kingdom. Owen did not now think otherwise after his stay in Ireland. He was not against the use of the sword, but the sword could clearly only accomplish so much. Simultaneously, there were both tearing-down and building-up aspects to cooperating with the “breaking forth” of the LDG in the British Isles. But, Owen insists, it is “foolish ... to suppose that unbelief” could be a true “foundation for quiet habitations.”

For Parliament to aim at the former without the latter was, again, “staggering” at the full “promises” of God.

When it came to New England in the mid-seventeenth century there was no need for the tearing-down of antichristian structures as there had been in England’s 1640s and Ireland’s 1650s. Owen’s interest in the propagation of the gospel in the new world, and specifically among the Native Americans, was a recurring theme from the late-1640s to the end of his life. He, of course, was not alone – New England had become a hot bed for pioneer missionary work. In 1648 Scottish ministers petitioned Parliament to send preachers and financial support to the work among the Indians. Parliament responded by instituting “The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England,” which has since come to be understood as the first missionary society. John Eliot – who was at Cambridge at the height of its Puritan fervor and had since immigrated to the new world – had come to be known as the “Apostle to the Indians.” Over three decades significant correspondence accumulated between Eliot

---

166 Perhaps this is owing in part to the account produced by New England ministers which had recently been reprinted in the British Isles: The Day Breaking, if not the Sun Rising of the Gospel with the Indians in New England (1647).
and Scottish and English ministers about the work among the Native Americans. Now called the Eliot Tracts, this correspondence provides an important window into many interrelated dynamics: the communication and partnership between transatlantic Puritans, the unusual fruit from Eliot’s ministry among the Indians, the interest in and financial support drawn from the British Isles, and the eschatological implications for it all. Along with seventeen other Congregationalist and Presbyterian ministers, Owen signed the preface to Strength out of Weakness, Or a Glorious Manifestation of the Further Progress of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New-England (1652), which again sought the support of the English Parliament for the missionary work. The basis for their plea focused on the scriptural beliefs of the global progress of the gospel and, once again, an expectant eschatology. In fact, its preface “To the Christian Reader,” is brimming with eschatological language — from texts from Revelation, to citing Brightman and Mede; from the conversion of the Jews, to the spread of the kingdom of Christ and a confidence of living “in this latter age” — all intermingled with missionary vision, zeal, and plans.

As for Owen himself at this time, he was, on the one hand optimistic, and, on the other, realistic. His sermon to Parliament

---

168 Owen had correspondence with “Ministers of Massachusetts” and had at least one exchange with Eliot. However, the only extant letter from Owen to Eliot is a clarification about his beliefs and practice of the Sabbath, not about the mission among Native Americans. See The Correspondence of John Owen, pp. 153-55.


170 On the Puritan transatlantic communication in general see: Bremer, Congregational Communion; Hardman Moore, Pilgrims.


173 “To the Christian Reader,” in Strength Out of Weakness (1652), no pagination.
in the same year confessed that the “glorious, visible kingdom of Christ” may still be “afar off.” Providing another of his lists of LDG expectations — and although this time listing what is still not present — he observes that “[Jews are still] not called, Antichrist [is still] not destroyed, the nations of the world [are still] generally wrapped up in idolatry and false worship,” and there are too few who are “dreaming of their deliverance.” Owen’s interest in and support of the spread of the gospel in the “dark corners of England,” Ireland, and New England show that he was one who was “dreaming of their deliverance.” Of course, others besides Owen were also dreaming of deliverance as the trans-Atlantic correspondence shows well, but “too few” were concerned for others’ spiritual “deliverance.” This was proof, to Owen, that the latter-day had not yet dawned.

We will return to the question of the extent of Owen’s optimism. For now, we simply note that he was at times conflicted, mixed with both anticipation and lament especially as pertained the gospel spreading. He was, however, more eschatologically-optimistic when it came to the practice of the Congregational churches.

F. Churches Edified by Free and Plentiful Light

The SDF envisioned that the age of LDG would involve “churches ... edified through a free and plentiful communication of light and grace,” and thereby will “enjoy in this world a more quiet, peaceable and glorious condition than they have enjoyed.” Though perhaps not immediately clear to all, this referred to the spread of Congregationalism. With the overthrow of Antichrist and the consequent “freeness” in religion in the land, the preaching of the gospel would spread, bringing about real, Spirit-indwelt converts. Believers would join themselves to “gospel churches,” covenanting together for simple worship, the sacraments, mutual edification, and the practice of discipline. In the latter-day, such communities of visible saints would not only

174 “Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power,” in Works, 8:376.
175 SDF, 22.5.
multiply and be “enlarged,” but would be “edified through a free and plentiful communication of light and grace” and enjoy “a more quiet, peaceable and glorious condition” than ever before. In other words, the Congregationalists’ ecclesiological ideals for local churches were not only thought of in terms of obeying a scriptural prescription but also as an eschatological indication. The flourishing of Congregationalism and the purity of the churches’ worship and holiness were signs of the LDG. But how precisely were eschatology and ecclesiology related?

Curiously the eschatological portions in the SDF were placed in the chapter on the church (chap. 22). Their *expectant eschatology* formed part of the basis for, what may be called, an *expectant ecclesiology*. The church was to be *visible* — i.e., volitional and holy — because regeneration and ongoing working of the Spirit enabled Christians to bear fruit and demonstrate Christ’s presence. Of course, this was an imperfect reality until the new heaven and new earth, but in the meantime it was to be a genuine and not insignificant reality. They also believed that the Spirit continued to provide guidance and power for the exercise of spiritual gifts and the proper worship of the church. Therefore, as was shown in the previous chapter, the Congregationalists believed that ministry of the church and the forms of its worship should be shaped to highlight a dependence on the Spirit and an expectation of his powerful work. Granted, these are no small theological and historical matters — matters which, unfortunately, cannot be fully articulated in this chapter. But even so, the connection between this *expectant ecclesiology* and an *expectant eschatology* cannot be

---


222
overlooked. Perhaps most helpful are Thomas Goodwin’s words on the latter age, a second reformation, and true saints joining gospel churches. Commenting on Rev. 11, he writes:

This being the exceeding great error and defect laid in the foundation of the churches of the first Reformation, especially in our British churches,—namely the adjoining this outward court of carnal and unregenerate Protestants, and receiving from them the first into the temple, worship, and communion of all ordinances; so that the bounds of the church were extended as far as the bounds of the Commonwealth; which was done out of human prudence .... And then, on the other side, this being, in this new-begun and second reformation of these churches, the main fundamental principle which is here mentioned, of receiving none into churches but only such worshippers as the reed, or light of the word ... applied by the judgment of men, who yet may err, shall discover to be truly saints, ... and this vision of falling out in, and as belonging to, the times of this latter age, and being purposely intended, as it were, to amend and correct that very error: hence it seems most properly to belong to this work of a second reformation.

Owen’s “Memorial for the Deliverance of Essex” sermon (i.e., Haman sermon) interpreted and applied the courts of Rev. 11 in much the same way. Regardless of their shared textual basis in Rev. 11, Owen would also have agreed with Goodwin’s conclusions on ecclesiology, the Reformation, England’s churches, visible membership, discipline, and the latter-day.

Of course, for Owen, Goodwin, and other like-Congregationalists, their understanding of the nature, membership, purity, discipline of the church was, in their

---

178 See Nuttall’s case for this connection: Visible Saints, pp. 131-67.
179 Goodwin, An Exposition of the Revelation (1639), in The Works of Thomas Goodwin, 3:140 (emphasis added). For more on Goodwin’s eschatological basis for Congregationalism, see Lawrence, “Thomas Goodwin and the Puritan Project,” chap. 3.
180 Owen says: “The Amorites live in Canaan, and must be removed. Oppressors and hypocrites enjoy many rites of the church, which must be taken from them. Rome and her adherents shall not have so much left as the name or title, appearance or show of a church. The outward court, which they have trodden down and defiled, shall be quite left out in the measuring of the temple, Rev. 11:2” (Works, 8:107).
estimation, derived strictly from Scripture. Therefore, there is a recurring appeal to what is apostolic — Congregationalism being a return to the pure, apostolic, ancient, and biblical model. As Theodore Bozeman has called it, there was a “primitivist dimension” to the epistemology of the Congregationalists. However there was also a progressive orientation to their eschatological-ecclesiology. The Congregationalists often described their ecclesiology in terms of “further light” or the “breaking forth of light.” In a 1648 sermon Owen describes the “things to come” as “the calling of the Jews, the coming in of the fulness of the Gentiles, the breaking out of light, beauty, and glory upon the churches.” In the late 1640s, Owen was hopeful that God was giving a “great light” for the “great work in our days.” He acknowledges that this concept of “new light” is “derided” by some, but one “will never serve the will of God in this generation” if “he sees not beyond the line of foregoing ages.” He is quick to clarify that the “peculiar light” for “this generation” is not in “new doctrines, as some suppose,” but, as was quoted earlier, in the “opening, unravelling, and revealing the Antichristian interest, interwoven and coupled together, in civil and spiritual things, into a state opposite to the kingdom of the Lord Jesus.”

There was also more than a hint with Owen and other Congregationalists that this eschatological “new light” provided

---

181 See Bozeman, To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism, esp. chap. 4.
182 “Deliverance of Essex,” in Works, 8:101 (emphasis added). These primitive and progressive dimensions are also seen in simply the title of Jeremiah Burroughs’ work, Jerusalems Glory Breaking forth into the World being a Scripture-Discovery of the New-Testament Church (1675).
183 “Deliverance of Essex,” in Works, 8:91.
184 “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in Works, 8:274. Elsewhere Owen seems more open to the possibility of progressive interpretation and ongoing theological refinement (e.g., Preface, SDF, pp. ix, xvii, xxiii). He also readily acknowledges that aspects of eschatology and ecclesiology in his day had stood on the shoulders of the first reformers. Therefore, in the quote above — that “new light” will not involve “new doctrines” — Owen’s purpose is most likely to distance his view from those like Quakers who used the language of “new light” to mystically embrace substantial new doctrines. Since his convictions changed on a number of points throughout his life, he was obviously open to ongoing theological refinement.
part of the basis for a certain view of liberty/toleraton.\footnote{An interrelationship between Owen's Congregationalism, views of toleration, and eschatology was also suggested by de Vries, “Die mij heeft liefgehad,” chap. 9.} In the words of Goodwin, “Christ hath given his people light ... in degrees.”\footnote{Goodwin, An Exposition of the First Chapter of ... Ephesians, in The Works of Thomas Goodwin, 1:558.} Therefore, “you must wait upon Christ to [give] it.” In the meantime, “men are not to be wrought off by falsehoods” as if “God hath no need of them. No, rather, till men do take in light, you should give them all that is comfortable in the condition they are in.”\footnote{Goodwin, The Works of Thomas Goodwin, 1:558-59. This same argument was shown in Chapter 3 of our study to have played an important role in the Savoyan's basis for liberty.}

On the other hand, though it is a sovereignly bestowed light, Owen insists in several Parliamentary sermons that there is a responsibility to see the recent national events for all their apocalyptic significance and to respond accordingly. “Every age hath its peculiar work” and “its peculiar light,” and should, therefore, seek to gain “insight” or “light” to “know” what God “will do and accomplish in our days” and also to understand “what is the work of your generation.”\footnote{“Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in Works, 8:274.} The nation’s leaders must: 1) consider, study, and understand the “light which he gives;” 2) know the “previous works” he has done, such as the destruction of Jerusalem; 3) the “expectation of the saints is another” aspect of the “will of God and the work of our generation;” and 4) evaluate whether Christ’s “adversaries” are fearful in the present circumstances.\footnote{“Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in Works, 8:273-75.} Elsewhere Owen suggests that another part of England’s responsibility for the eschatological promises is meditative, personal, and spiritual. “Bring the first-fruits of glory into thy bosom. See the Jews called,—the residue of opposers subdued,—the gospel exalted,—Christ enthroned,—all thy sins pardoned,—corruption conquered,—glory enjoyed. Roll thyself in those golden streams every day.”\footnote{Deliverance of Essex,” in Works, 8:102 (emphasis added). The experiential element of the LDG can also be seen in another one of Owen’s LDG lists where one...}
should be an exultant, devotional anticipation of that day when the “quiet, peaceable and glorious state” of the LDG will fill the nations, governments, churches, and individual Christians. And the anticipation, longing, and pursuit of these realities must start with a nation’s leaders, according to Owen.

G. Summary

The eschatology of the LDG in the mid-seventeenth century was rich and complex in its interconnectedness to other doctrines, ecclesiastical practices, and personal godliness. It could be cited as the basis and motivation for almost anything. It had national, political, ecclesiastical, personal, and global implications. It fueled hope and labors for further reformation, a national church settlement, missions, politics, pastoring, pastoral partnerships, and countless sermons and publications. It helped explain godly persecution, Laudian “popish” worship, Charles’ tyranny, civil wars, and even the king’s execution.

According to Jue, Mede’s legacy “produced a sustained interest in millenarianism that was not bound exclusively to the political circumstances of the 1640-50s.” There is no reason to doubt that Jue’s analysis of Mede is correct. It may also apply to some millenarians in the 1640-50s. But with Owen the relationship between eschatology, politics, and ecclesiology is more complex and interconnected. His view of the LDG in the 1640-50s was indeed tied to many political and ecclesiastical hopes and aims: civil wars, political upheavals, the calling of the Jews, the propagation of the gospel, godly rule, liberty, the churches’ purity and worship, and even personal piety.

That said, the connections between Owen’s eschatology and his views of liberty and the church can be overstated. The lines adjoining certain eschatological beliefs to certain ecclesiastical or political convictions are by no means uniformly consistent among expectations is “farther assurance of love than at present enjoyed, nearer communion with Father and Son, being with Christ, freed from misery and corruption, dwelling with God for ever” (“Deliverance of Essex,” in Works, 8:101).

191 Jue, Heaven Upon Earth, p. 247 (emphasis added).
Owen’s contemporaries. For example, Samuel Rutherford was very interested in apocalyptic thought. At some points his eschatology was more aggressively apocalyptic (e.g., closer to millenarianism) than Owen’s. And yet Rutherford’s ecclesiological, political, and epistemological views were in many ways far more conservative than the same in Owen.\textsuperscript{192} It would be inaccurate, then, to say that an expectant eschatology (millenarian or LDG) demanded Congregationalist ecclesiology. On the other hand, that does not mean that Owen and other Congregationalists did not see connections themselves. Owen’s views of the nation, church, liberty, and missions have an intricate, conscious interrelationship, and eschatology often functioned like tendons and ligaments between the bones of doctrines and ideals. In short, his was a comprehensive view of the kingdom of Christ.

The question still remains, however: if Owen’s eschatology was, in fact, tied to nation and church, and if it was unapologetically based on interpreting encouraging circumstances as eschatological realities, how did his view of the LDG remain intact through the Restoration when nation and church had been so severely (re)shaken and there were few encouraging signs left to which to cling? As was already noted, because the same theses of LDG-belief are variously but quite similarly enumerated by Owen — not just during the Revolution, but throughout the Restoration — it has to be maintained that the core theses of his eschatology remained intact throughout his life. His optimism for the nearness of the LDG may have waned in later years, but the basic content of his eschatological expectations did not vary, neither in the frustrations of the Protectorate nor the disenfranchisement of the Restoration. But, again, how did Owen’s basic eschatological tenets remain intact in years of nonconformity?

Surprisingly so, the answer to that question lies as much in his Revolutionary sermons (pre-1660) as it does in his post-Restoration works (post-1660). As we shall see, there are several subtle underpinnings to Owen’s eschatology found on both sides

\textsuperscript{192} See Coffey, Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions; “Apocalypticism during the Puritan Revolutions,” pp. 121-27.
of the 1660-divide that help to give his eschatology consistency and flexibility.

III. The Subtle Eschatological Underpinnings

There is little doubt that in the 1640-50s Owen believed that the signs of the times could be extrapolated into a hopeful future for England. His optimism for the kingdom of Christ in England, and his belief in the nearness of the LDG, are matters which have already been demonstrated in this chapter. But there have also been a handful of subtle hints thus far that Owen’s eschatology, even in the midst of all the apparent Puritan victories and LDG optimism, was consciously tempered and cautious. Of course, that is not to say that his interpretations should not have been even more tempered; nor is it to say that no contemporary was more cautious in their end-time belief. Once again, these are degrees of differences, not black and white categories. Nevertheless, it is important to see what limits, qualifications, and cautions he placed in his eschatology and how it brought stability in years of disenfranchisement.

A. Interpretive Cautions

As we have seen, Owen’s formulation of LDG eschatology was a mix of scriptural and circumstantial interpretation. But there are at least three ways in which this interpretation was, relatively speaking, cautious or tempered.

1. Providence. Owen saw the interpretation of providence as not only acceptable but necessary for the proper understanding of and readying for the end-times. As has been shown, sometimes his interpretation of the optimistic circumstances of the Revolution years led him to believe that the LDG could be just over the horizon. However, what has not yet been made fully clear yet in this chapter is that Owen’s language was optimistic, but not emphatically certain. He clearly believed that specific past events were without question “the mighty working of Providence,” but

he was also somewhat judicious in his speculations about what past or present circumstances would indicate for the future.\textsuperscript{194} He regularly speaks of what “seems” or “appears” to be forthcoming, and what God “may” be doing.

In a 1649 sermon, for instance, Owen asks how it can be known which earthly authorities the Lord will “destroy and overturn”\textsuperscript{195} His six-fold answer provides principles to guide, but not specific speculations.\textsuperscript{196} Upon first read, they appear to imply a sure and glorious future for “the godly” in England, but Owen never mentions any such specifics. It is telling that there is nothing in his six-fold answer that would warrant any recantation in the Restoration years.

On the other hand, it is surely significant that, for better or worse, Owen never abandoned the legitimacy of providential interpretation after the Restoration. In the darker days of the last two decades of his life he was still asking what the Lord was doing in his nation’s affairs, and how those circumstances related to the apocalypticism of the Bible. Specific political turns, pieces of legislation, calamities,\textsuperscript{197} and increases of persecution all received unblushing theological interpretation.\textsuperscript{198} On the whole, he interpreted the post-1660 political upheavals and persecution of the godly as divine judgment on the nation as a whole.

Owen frequently spoke of “providential alterations.” Of course, by this he was not suggesting that the eternal plan of God had been altered or thwarted. Providential “alterations,” for Owen, are simply the surprising and acute turns in the plan of God.

\textsuperscript{194} Compare Owen with the approach taken by Mede in which many providential/eschatological details are believed to be “evident and infallible.” See Jue, \textit{Heaven upon Earth}, pp. 101-02.


\textsuperscript{196} \textit{Works}, 9:210-12.

\textsuperscript{197} Particularly the Great Plague (1656-66) and Great Fire of London (1666).


229
That this language is used in both pre-Restoration\textsuperscript{199} and post-Restoration sermons is telling.\textsuperscript{200} It could be used to describe the hopeful, encouraging “turns” of the Revolution years and the painful “turns” into nonconformity and persecution. Both were “providential alterations” attributed to the mysterious-yet-perfect wisdom of God in the unfolding of his plan. The severe “turn” into forced-nonconformity had other explanations and other secondary causes, which will be discussed in a few pages, but the mystery of providence was no small explanation. Further, the “providential alteration” of the Restoration and demanded conformity did not force Owen to abandon a providential interpretation altogether, in part because in 1640-50s he spoke of the optimistic circumstances with a subtle but calculated caution.

2. Computations. Many of Owen’s contemporaries who shared one form or another of an expectant eschatology were not hesitant about “computations” – i.e., setting future dates for the fulfillment of scriptural prophecies. In Mede’s calculation, 1656 would see the millennium ushered in. Samuel Hartlib calculated the beast’s end to come in 1655.\textsuperscript{201} Goodwin believed that various apocalyptic events would happen from 1650 to 1700, but Christ would return in 1656.\textsuperscript{202}

Owen was not averse to attempt a mathematical mapping of the numbers and historical markers of Daniel’s prophecy of 70 weeks.\textsuperscript{203} But in Owen’s scheme this was almost solely a historical “computation,” and did not include setting dates for future events, such as the defeat of Antichrist, the beginning of the LDG, or the return of Messiah. In 1649, Owen could say to


\textsuperscript{201} Samuel Hartlib, \textit{Clavis Apocalyptica} (1651).

\textsuperscript{202} Beeke and Jones, \textit{A Puritan Theology}, p. 813. Goodwin’s extensive discussion of calculations and compilation of the various interpretations that had accumulated even before 1640 is in \textit{An Exposition of the Revelation} (1639), in \textit{The Works of Thomas Goodwin}, 3:194-205.

Parliament that “computations ... have their use,” but he quickly moved on to offer instead “some rules whereby you may come to be acquainted with the work of God in the days wherein we live ....”\textsuperscript{204} All other references to “computations” and date-setting in the \textit{Works} are negative. In 1652, Owen preached to Parliament, laying out a twelve-fold recommendation for the “settling of religion” in England. There are eschatological references scattered throughout, including a word of caution: “Who, now, can fathom the counsels of the Almighty?—who hath searched his bosom, and can by computation tell us when he shall pour out his Spirit for the accomplishment of these things?”\textsuperscript{205}

His later works are repeatedly and consistently critical about the “computation” of future events.\textsuperscript{206} In 1680 Owen was still returning to the same list of eschatological expectations: “the calling of the Jews, the destruction of Antichrist, the peace and glory of the churches of Christ.” These are still the “signal promises” for which to watch and pray. However, Owen laments how the eschatological optimism and expectancy (no doubt referring to pre-Restoration days) of many had led to their disappointment and disillusionment:

> some have precipitately antedated them, some unwarrantably stated the times of them; whose disappointment and their own unbelief and carnal wisdom have brought the generality of men to look no more after them, and either to think that the promises of them are failed, or that indeed such promises were never made,—wherein unbelief hath found very learned advocates. But it is certain that there are periods of time affixed unto these things ....\textsuperscript{207}

Though it be “delayed beyond the computation of some,” Owen bids his readers, “yet ‘wait for it, because it will surely come.’ It

\textsuperscript{204} “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in \textit{Works}, 8:276.
\textsuperscript{205} “Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power” (1652), in \textit{Works}, 8:377.
will not tarry one moment beyond the time of old prefixed unto it.”

Because Owen was more guarded than some of his contemporaries, especially as it pertained to the setting of dates, he was not among those disillusioned in days of nonconformity. Disappointed, yes; but the basics tenets of his eschatology remained intact.

3. Eschatological Specifics. While Owen frequently offered similar lists of basic LDG expectations, he never proposed a precise order, location, or manner in which these eschatological hopes would be fulfilled. Many times in Owen’s Parliamentary sermons, he even states that many details of the latter-days are still inherently cloudy and cannot be known. As for “the manner whereby God will do these things,” Owen warns, “Many perplexing, killing circumstances attend his dispensations. I shall instance only in one,—and that is, darkness and obscurity, whereby he holds the minds of men in uncertainty and suspense, for his own glorious ends.”

Owen, instead, encourages faith and patience in the simple fact of Christ’s return over eschatological curiosities and speculation:

The fixing and computing of the time of the Man of Sin, of Antichrist, by days, and months, and years, is to secure our faith in the punctual determination of the season, but not to satisfy our curiosity when the season should be. But the consideration of this, that there is such a time, or a determinate season, is a great foundation of faith and patience.

This chapter has already referred to another example of Owen not venturing into eschatological details which may be too precise: his belief about the future of the Jews did not include the geographical specificity of his companions. He believed in the future redemption of the Jews, but did not propose how they

---

208 Hebrews, in Works, 21:299.
209 See, for example, “Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power,” in Works, 8:379. See also “God’s Work in Founding Zion,” in Works, 8:414; passim.
210 “Sermon 12” (1680), in Works, 9:506.
would be converted, nor did he attach their conversion to a return to England.

Other than his typical lists of eschatological expectations — Antichrist defeated, Jews restored, kingdoms shaken, churches enjoying peace and spiritual prosperity — Owen largely avoids many specifics for the end-time. And this is true on both sides of the 1660-divide. He was certainly more optimistic about the nearness of the LDG before the Restoration, but his eschatology remained intact because it was less speculative than it could have been.

These were interpretive cautions that guarded his eschatology. A similar dynamic can be seen in his spoken and written warnings which stressed human responsibility.

B. Warnings and Human Responsibility

In part because of the hopeful signs of the times in the 1640-50s, Owen believed that the nation had special responsibilities in cooperating with and laboring toward the very things that Christ had promised and seemed to be accomplishing. To Owen, God would sovereignly, and perhaps somewhat mysteriously, orchestrate the events leading to the LDG, but England as a nation had its duties in these matters too. On the one hand, the timing of and plan for the kingdom’s coming was fixed, predetermined by a sovereign and wise God. On the other hand, human decisions had real consequences. The divine plan was accomplished through a variety of human means, not apart from them. Or, to put it in the language of the WCF and SDF, Owen believed that God’s free, unchangeable ordination of “whatsoever comes to pass” did not remove “liberty or contingency of second causes.” He held to the concurrence of human choices and divine sovereign freedom.

211 WCF and SDF, chap. 3.1.

212 It may be surprising to some that it is in Owen’s earliest and most passionately anti-Pelagian work that we find his most thorough theological treatment of concurrence, second-causes, and human freedom: A Display of Arminianism (1643), in Works, vol. 10, chap. 4. For an examination of these issues in broader Reformed Orthodox thought, see Willem van Asselt, Martin Bac, and Roelf te Velde, eds.,
Nowhere in Owen’s *Works* is the tension and mystery between divine sovereignty and human responsibility better demonstrated than in the eschatologically-related warnings in his sermons. For all of the eschatological optimism that we have seen throughout this chapter, Owen also had quite a lot to say about the mystery of the future and how human actions could seem to determine a different outcome than the one that appeared to be on the horizon. He believed throughout the 1640-50s that England was, at multiple times, at another fork in the road. Or, perhaps it would be fairer to say, in those decades the nation was constantly at a fork in the road, and every debate, every political change, every ecclesiastical development would either be a step toward or away from reformation, progress, and the latter-day.

We have already considered one explanation for the trying circumstances of the Restoration according to Owen — the sheer mystery of God’s sovereign will. We have also touched upon another explanation for it — God’s judgment on the nation. In what follows we will consider the points of human responsibility and failure, according to Owen, that plunged the nation into judgment and purification. In the promising years of the Revolution, these themes appear as warnings to Parliament — divine judgment could come upon the nation. In the darker days of post-Restoration the same themes reappear in historical analysis of what went wrong — divine judgment had come upon the nation. Four main themes related to human responsibility and divine judgment are regularly stated by Owen both before and after the Restoration.

1. **Liberty.** Throughout the Revolutionary years, Owen called on England’s magistracy (in whatever form) to more fully address the “groans for liberty.” Chapter 3 of this study demonstrated Owen’s keen interest and politico-ecclesiastical efforts toward an uncoercive godly church-state. The theme of religious liberty was also no small part of his sermon on the day following the regicide. There he warns Parliament in stark terms:

---


213 “Righteous Zeal Encouraged” (1648), in *Works*, 8:147.
The mystery of antichristian tyranny had been revealed but England’s rulers must act on it. He warns, “if you should stumble ... at the same block of impiety and cruelty [which marked Charles’ reign], there is not another sifting to be made.” In other words, God may run out of patience with the nation. “Poor England lieth at stake.”

Such statements about the church’s liberty and the evils of demanded conformity and persecution are practically everywhere in Owen’s sermons to the Commons. It is quite possibly his primary concern for Parliament’s future work. And not infrequently, he not only pleads with Parliament about its task of protection and liberty, but clearly warns about a different outcome for the future should the church-state return to uniformity and demanded conformity.

The logic holds up, especially if we place ourselves in Owen’s shoes: as it goes with liberty, so it goes with the church’s unity and the churches’ worship. As liberty recedes from the land, so do the signs of Antichrist’s defeat and the kingdom being “shaken and translated” toward the interests of Christ. Without liberty, in Owen’s thinking, there is no LDG in sight. Owen was generally hopeful in the years of Revolution, but he could also foresee another outcome. Thus, his optimism was always conditional. He pleaded with England’s rulers for liberty; he also warned them of the alternative. On occasion, Owen even reminded Parliament of his previous pleadings and warnings to them. For example:

... when those called to power, cease to exert it in a subserviency to the kingdom of Christ, for the true spiritual advantage of his

214 “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:143 (emphasis added).
215 “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:138
216 “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:138
217 I am using “liberty” here in a purposefully unqualified way since the previous chapters have spelled out Owen’s specific parameters for balancing liberty with promoting orthodoxy, limiting heresy, unifying “the godly,” etc. I am assuming that view of liberty in the above.
people,—there will be an end of England’s glory and happiness. I say, Hear ye this, all ye people! This I have delivered long ago, and many times in this place;—this I say still, and in this persuasion hope to live and die.  

Of course, in the post-Restoration years Owen’s fears were realized: the Act of Uniformity, the Great Ejection, the Conventicle Act, the Five Mile Act, etc., all aimed primarily at suppression of the Puritan vision. Throughout these persecuted times Owen returned frequently to themes of liberty, persecution, nonconformity, and the like, but the seedlings were laid decades before in his appeals and warnings to Parliament. Thus, while the age of LDG had slipped below the horizon of England’s near future, Owen continued to plead with rulers and saints, to warn of further decline, and to hope for the sun to soon rise again. But, as the future was still to be determined (humanly speaking) in the days of Puritan Parliaments, so it was in days of Puritan persecution. Writing in 1678:

The question is, as to us and our posterity, Whether Christ or Antichrist? whether the worship of God or of idols? whether the effusion, and waiting for the effusion, of the Spirit of God in his worship, or all manner of superstitious impositions? This is the present contest; and, it may be, under heaven there never was a more signal instance of the issue of this contest than will be in these nations in these days.  

2. Personal Reformation. Another explanation for the divine judgment of post-Restoration years, according to Owen, was the failure of “personal reformation” in the nation generally and in its national leaders especially. By “personal reformation” (or reforming self) he meant repentance, personal holiness, humility, and fervor for communion with Christ.  

218 “God’s Presence with a People the Spring of their Prosperity” (1656), in Works, 8:445.
219 See Edmund Calamy, The Church and the Dissenters Compar’d as to Persecution (1719); Continuation of the Account (1727); Matthews, ed., Calamy Revised.
221 “God’s Work in Founding Zion” (1656), in Works, 8:423ff.
In the middle of the Protectorate years, there were still plenty of political difficulties, but hopes were generally high for the Puritan cause. Reformation (further reformation), though once a by-word, was now a rally cry. Indicative of this Puritan optimism Owen powerfully preached to Parliament in September 1656:

Take heed lest that evil be still abiding upon any of our spirits, that we should be crying out and calling for reformation without a due consideration of what it is, and how it is to be brought about. ... Would you have a reformation? Be you more humble, more holy, more zealous; delight more in the ways, worship, ordinances of God; reform your persons in your lives, relations, families, parishes, as to gospel obedience, and you will see a glorious reformation indeed. ... You that have prayed under persecution for reformation,—you that have fought in the high places of the field for reformation,—you that have covenanted and sworn for reformation,—go now, reform yourselves: ... be holy, serve God in holiness,—keep close to his worship and ordinances, love them, delight in them, bring forth such fruits as men may glorify God on your account; condemn the world, justify the cause of God by a gospel conversation, take seven years’ peace and plenty, and see what you can do?—If, after all this, we still cry out, Give us a reformation, and complain not of our own negligence, folly, hatred of personal reformation, to be the only cause of that want, it is easy to judge what we would have, had we our desires.222

While there is no apocalyptic language in the above paragraph, the sermon elsewhere taps into the typical eschatological themes. Regardless, as we have seen in this chapter, Owen’s aspirations for England’s further reformation were eschatological at root. Therefore, what we see in this impassioned plea is another condition of the eschatological future. It is hopeful in its exhortation, but also sobering in its warning. If the rulers and ministers of the land will not be individually, inwardly, and truly reformed then, Owen implies, God will grant them what they apparently want — no reformation.

222 “God’s Work in Founding Zion,” in Works, 8:422-23 (emphasis his).
While the above quote carries a unique passion, Owen’s sermons to Parliament consistently made the same appeals for personal godliness. Further, these appeals often come shortly after an optimistic, eschatological interpretation of recent political upheavals. In doing so, Owen warns that eschatological optimism must not result in swagger, pride, and self-reliance. In fact, it is in some of his most hopeful and optimistic sermons — indeed, those sermons which most unabashedly celebrate military victory as divine eschatological advancement — that Owen is most concerned with the need for national and personal holiness.

Unfortunately, most historians have read such texts only for their apparent triumphalism and have thus overlooked that the pleas for humility, introspection, and spiritual disciplines may, in fact, be a more dominant theme. In such pleas there is also the warning which limits, and even places conditions upon, the present-optimism: “If we are not interested in holiness,” Owen cautions, “we shall not be interested in safety.”

These words appear to be simply prescient in light of the strict conformity and persecution that nonconformists faced in the last two decades of Owen’s life. Of course, his post-Restoration sermons not only continue to plea for humility, holiness, prayer, and fervent communion with God, but they also recall the nation’s failure to respond in holiness to the blessing, fruit, and opportunity that was theirs in the years of the Revolution. The years of persecution were understood by Owen as divine judgment on God’s people because of their coolness to God. It was a purification of the church’s relative indifference. This

---

224 For example: “Deliverance of Essex and Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:77-162.
226 See “How We may Bring our Hearts to Bear Reproofs” (1674), in Works, 8:474ff; “An Humble Testimony unto the Goodness and Severity of God,” in Works, 8:594ff; also the works on spirituality in Works, vol. 7 (see esp. p. 141).
judgment/purification was all the more reason to repent and reform themselves afresh.²²⁷

Owen’s call to personal reformation was not fundamentally different on either side of 1660. In fact, his priority for personal holiness made sense of the Restoration.²²⁸ He had warned of God’s purifying fire.

3. Reformation and Unity. Related to both the interest of national reformation and the need for personal reformation is another note of application that Owen frequently strikes in his sermons to Parliament: to flee from private agendas, mere party allegiances, and political maneuvering, especially concerning the too-fine details of the church’s ongoing reformation and the “settling of religion.”²²⁹ In other words, he was calling for the uniting of “the godly.” The warning he issued to Parliament after the execution of the king could not be more bold or clear:

if by your own personal practice and observance, your protection, countenance, authority, laws, you do not assert, maintain, uphold the order of the gospel, and administration of the ordinances of Christ ..., you will be forsaken by the angel of God’s presence, and you will become an astonishment to all the inhabitants of the earth. And herein I do not speak as one hesitating or dubious, but positively assert it ....²³⁰

Here Owen is not calling England’s rulers to be indifferent or lazy about the church’s doctrine and ministry, but neither can they be

²²⁷ See “God’s Withdrawing His Presence, the Correction of his Church” (1675), in Works, 9:296ff; “Providential Changes, and Argument for Universal Holiness,” in Works, 9:131-97.

²²⁸ Owen said in his sermon, “Providential Changes”: “It is a time of care and love. The way of his working out the designs of his heart are, indeed, oftentimes dark and hid, and his own do not see so clearly how things lie in a tendency to the event and fruits of love; but so it is;—Christ comes not but with a design of love and pity .... Every such dispensation is a coming of Christ;—the coming of Christ, as it is trying in itself, ... [but] be the dispensation what it will, never so sharp and severe unto them, yet it is in love and compassion to their souls” (Works, 9:141).

²²⁹ See “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:172ff.

²³⁰ “Righteous Zeal Encouraged,” in Works, 8:154 (see also pp. 381ff).
so concerned with ecclesiastical particulars that matters of adiaphora are once again imposed on a minority party.

Owen’s now-well-known works on sin and temptation in the late-1650s may have aimed precisely in this direction. It was the particular sin of disunity which had gotten in the way of a proper settlement of the church during the Protectorate and now must be “put to death.” As Goold writes of Owen’s 1658 work, Of Temptation:

The vigilant eye of Owen detected certain mischievous effects accruing from the eminent success which had attended hitherto the efforts of the party with whom he acted. The fear of a common danger had formerly kept them united in their views and movements, while it led them to depend upon the true source of all strength and hope. They were now sinking into those strifes and divisions which paved the way for the restoration of monarchy; and Owen speaks of “a visible declension from reformation seizing upon the professing party of these nations.”

Such a concern for the consequences of disunity was not only felt amidst the frustrating attempts to unify “the godly” in the Protectorate. Throughout his 1640s sermons, Owen was frequently concerned with Parliament finding that proper mixture of conviction and flexibility for the reformation of the church-state. This goal hinged in no small part on eschewing temptation, seeking holiness, and laboring in humble, unified service to Christ and his cause. When looking back on the English

---

232 So argues Williams, “God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen,” connecting Owen’s growing politico-ecclesiastical frustrations to eschatological adjustments.
233 While it is probably true that these concerns and warnings are heightened in the last few years of the Protectorate, contra Williams, they do not first appear in those years and signal a shift in Owen’s eschatology (Williams, “God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen,” pp. 52-90). The same concerns and warnings are found throughout Owen’s sermons even during the civil wars; therefore, these concerns and warnings should be seen as part of Owen’s overall LDG eschatology, not inconsistent with it.
Puritan experiment, Owen clearly saw partisanship as largely to blame for its disintegration.\textsuperscript{234}

As we have seen in this chapter, the “flourishing of the church in peace and purity” was one of the prophetic expectations for the latter-day.\textsuperscript{235} Thus, the ongoing divisions of the church caused Owen to lament in 1680 that such eschatological promises, “as to all outward appearances, seem as remote from accomplishment as they were the first day the promise was given; and the difficulties against it increase continually.” Yet, returning to a word of hope, Owen assures, “notwithstanding, the promise shall break through all difficulties: at the end it shall speak, and not lie.”\textsuperscript{236}

The church’s eschatological peace and purity certainly appeared closer in reach in the 1640-50s than in Restoration years, but the eschatological ideals remained the same for Owen. In those earlier decades he had warned of more defragmentation if the church would not better unify around further reformation. He was hopeful for unity, reformation, and the coming of the LDG, but his warnings and qualifications in the Revolution made the trials of the Restoration, while no less difficult, at least not utterly surprising.

Returning once again to John Cotton, this is a point at which the two transatlantic figures slightly differ. Like Owen, Cotton’s eschatology was heavily intertwined with ecclesiology. However, the New Englander had more specific expectations for the spread of Congregationalism. According to one recent dissertation on Cotton, “Congregationalism was the polity that would lead God’s people into the millennium.”\textsuperscript{237} While Owen believed that Congregationalism would flourish in the latter-day, and vehemently believed that ecclesiastical tyranny would cease, his

\textsuperscript{237} Chi, “John Cotton’s ... Apocalyptic Vision for England,” p. 112 (see chap. 2).
expectation moved more from eschatology to ecclesiology, whereas Cotton moved more from ecclesiology to eschatology. For Cotton, “New England’s Congregationalism was the way to the millennium.”238 But regardless of the direction of theological influence between eschatology and ecclesiology, Owen was not as narrow with his eschatological expectations as Cotton was. Again, most often Owen’s lists of eschatological expectations comprise a half-dozen or so key ideals. Cotton was more narrowly focused on Congregationalism as the way to the millennium.

His millennially-oriented Congregationalism likely influenced Cotton’s stronger opposition to Presbyterianism, which he spoke of in apocalyptic terms. While Episcopacy was the primary enemy of and hurdle before Congregationalism, and while Cotton could work with Scottish Presbyterians against Episcopacy, Presbyterianism was also a hierarchical polity that would need to be vanquished. It was not “the Beast,” but Presbyterianism did have a “tang of … the image of the … Beast” according to Cotton.239 Owen never spoke of Presbyterianism in such critical and apocalyptic terms, but instead worked toward unity and comprehension between Congregationalists and Presbyterians before the Restoration – and at least unity and mutual toleration following the Restoration. Because his ideal for reform was more broad and his concern for unity included forbearance, he could still make eschatological-sense of the Restoration.

C. One Added Nuance

This leads to one added nuance to Owen’s post-Restoration eschatology compared with his pre-Restoration thought. Much has been made in this chapter about Owen’s numerous lists of eschatological expectations. The consistency between them is remarkable, and surely proves that the basic tenets of Owen’s LDG belief remained despite the post-Restoration misfortunes. However, in a few of his eschatological lists, among the typical expectations – Antichrist destroyed, Jews called, spreading of the

gospel to all nations, and the peace and purity of the church — there is also the expectation of trials, tribulations, or difficulties.\(^\text{240}\) These few eschatological lists which include trials, tribulations, difficulties, etc., are found only within the years of persecution and nonconformity (post-1660). Of course, that is not to say that Owen’s theology before the Restoration had no category for trials, tribulation, or difficulties. For that matter, Owen sometimes spoke of tribulation in quite apocalyptic terms well before days of persecution.\(^\text{241}\) However, it is noteworthy, and surely an indication of the inescapable difficulties of the years of nonconformity, that whenever Owen came to enumerate the end-time expectations, the tribulation of the saints is almost always among the otherwise hopeful and happy expectations.

Owen, in fact, used the expectation of difficulties quite pastorally in these later years. He encouraged his readers that Scripture not only tells the saints of all ages to expect tribulation, but it is also a “sign ... of the last days” in Scripture.\(^\text{242}\) In other words, Owen came to take some degree of comfort in the persecution of the godly in later years, seeing it as a kind of eschatological first-fruits of the latter-day.\(^\text{243}\) That “some mock,” he preached, and “false light ... breaks forth, ... this is no evidence against the coming of Christ, but rather for it.”\(^\text{244}\)

This expectation of trials and tribulation was not an adjustment to Owen’s eschatology so much as an added nuance or emphasis that grew out of his ongoing and unashamed interpretation of scripture with circumstances.

IV. Conclusion

These subtle (and previously overlooked) eschatological underpinnings connect Owen’s eschatology across the 1660-


\(^{244}\) “Sermon 11,” in \textit{Works}, 9:156.
divide, and allow for a basic continuity and consistency through the very different circumstances of the two periods. The above themes provide an explanation — a *divine* explanation — for the “providential alterations” that occurred after 1660. For all the optimism, if not triumphalism, in Owen’s interpretation of providence in the 1640-50s, various warnings were laced throughout. His optimism was, in many ways, always conditional.

Most Owen scholars have assumed that the post-1660 Owen must have been rather embarrassed by parts of his earlier nationally-oriented eschatology. And, of course, after the Restoration tones of regret, remorse, and disappointment are laced throughout Owen’s writings. But there is also an often-overlooked element of justification. In his post-Restoration sermons, Owen’s eschatology is not undermined; instead his earlier warnings and conditions are, in fact, substantiated.

The mysterious divine-human relationship in the working of providence meant that the LDG appeared close in the best of days of the Puritan Revolution; but it also meant that if God truly was “breaking forth” upon their land (and the whole world) in LDG, then it follows that unity, liberty, reformation, holiness, and the spread of the gospel would all flourish in unprecedented ways. There were concurrent divine and human explanations for the LDG appearing quite close in the Revolution and then slipping below the horizon in the Restoration. Owen’s qualifications, limits, and cautions are, in many ways, simply intensified in the enlightened state and painful circumstances of the Restoration. But their seeds had been planted in the bed of his earliest eschatological sermons.

Most historians have assumed that 1660 marked the twilight of expectant Puritan eschatology; many assessments of Owen have followed suit and assumed that his eschatology went through some sort of shift with the disenfranchising circumstances of the Restoration. What Johnston has suggested more broadly for moderate nonconformity is true specifically in the case of Owen: “millenarian and apocalyptic speculation, historiographically tenable as an explanation of political and religious impetus prior to 1660, remained a significant aspect of the language of
estrangement from the government and ecclesiastical settlement of Restoration England.” 245 Nonconformists like Owen “still found the need ... to place their experience of the religious and political situation which confronted them into the scheme of an unfolding prophetic plan.” 246 Further, in the case of Owen specifically, he did not simply remain apocalyptically interested; this chapter has hopefully also demonstrated that his eschatology remained essentially the same despite the (sometimes violent) ebb and flow through the 1640-80s. This theological consistency is not because Owen’s eschatology had no attachment to political or ecclesiastical beliefs and aims, but because he was relatively less speculative and more tempered in his interpretations. Or, put another way, it was not in spite of his eschatological beliefs that he weathered the storm of the nonconformity and persecution; certain aspects of the eschatology itself allowed for both flexibility and consistency. His was a remarkably durable eschatology.

Also, though Owen’s eschatology continued to find connection to circumstances through the interpretation of providence, it is also essential to remember the theological connections that were always shared between the LDG and other doctrines and practice: liberty of conscience, the church’s purity and worship, the propagation of the gospel, the defeat of Antichrist, the calling of the Jews, etc. Each, on their own, had strong scriptural support for Owen. The exegetical bases for each and theological interconnectedness of the whole meant that the LDG eschatology, though tested in the Restoration, could not be easily ripped from its theological moorings.

We close this chapter with a word from Owen on the testing and trying of doctrine. Though here writing on covenant theology, Owen’s words in his Hebrews exposition could equally apply to eschatology:

It is a perilous experiment for any system, slowly evolved in the course of ages, when its separate parts, coloured with the changeful hue of the different times and circumstances in which they came to

light, are tested with the view of ascertaining if they possess the unity and coherence which truth, and truth only, can under such a trial evince. Any essential inconsistency would be fatal to the claims and pretensions of the system. But when a body of truths, having in themselves no abstract and necessary relationship, such as links the principles and axioms of geometry into the unity of a science, hazards its entire character and authority upon the assertion that some change, annulling the outward forms in which it had been previously embodied, has not only left its essential principles unimpaired, but stamped upon them a confirmation so important and so indispensable that without it they would be proved untenable and absurd,—it must be felt that a system which comes safely out of the testing ordeal of such a change is entitled to our implicit confidence.\footnote{247 Exercitations of the Epistle to the Hebrews (1668), in Works, 18:viii.}
Chapter
6

Conclusion

This study has sought to examine the kingdom of Christ in the thought, activities, and context of John Owen. For Owen, the kingdom is the spiritual rule of Christ in the hearts of the saints, but it is also to be manifested visibly and increasingly in national, ecclesiastical, and eschatological ways. It is difficult to overestimate the political and ecclesiastical purposes of Owen’s works and endeavors. A narrative survey here will summarize many of the works, events, ideas, efforts involved, in order to summarize Owen’s thorough concern for the kingdom of Christ in England and her churches.

I. Political/Ecclesiastical Works and Endeavors

While in pastoral ministry in Fordham, and later Coggeshall, Owen wrote several works touching on practical ecclesiology, church government, national religion, the magistrate, toleration, and uniting the saints. In 1646, while the Westminster Assembly hammered out a proposal for a British church settlement, the still-young Owen boldly put forth his own short proposal for uniting the “two great parties.”

It was also in 1646 that Owen preached before the House of Commons – the first of many occasions to come. With apocalyptic zeal and hopefulness he called on the Commons to do their utmost to unite on the “settling of religion” at home and the

---

1 Works, vols. 8 and 13.
“propagation of the gospel” at home and abroad. As the last chapter discussed, Owen preached to Parliament on the day following the execution of Charles I. But it was four months before (or more) that Owen preached to the brass of the New Model Army and strongly hinted at the need for the king’s execution – this a full month (or more) before his close personal friend would do so in The Remonstrance of the Army.

Following another apocalyptically-laden sermon a year later (1649) Owen drew the attention of Cromwell, who immediately employed him as chaplain for campaigns to Ireland and Scotland; also making him preacher to the Council of State. Other appointments soon followed: Dean of Christ Church Oxford in 1651 and Vice-Chancellor of the University in 1652. Of course, his place at Oxford was not merely educationally strategic for the Puritan vision, but politically as well. As Oxford’s representative, Owen was an MP in Cromwell’s First Protectorate Parliament.\(^3\)

Also, as earlier chapters demonstrated, the early 1650s marked the start of a near-decade of politico-ecclesiastical committees, proposals, confessions, sermons, and tracts for Owen.\(^4\) The mid-1650s especially bore a flurry of activity for national religion, not least in his role in the “triers” system of ministerial approbation during the Protectorate.\(^5\)

He continued to serve as one of Cromwell’s closest religious advisors through the mid-1650s.\(^6\) In fact, it was Owen’s political convictions and outspokenness which ultimately led to a divide between the preacher and the Lord Protector. When the crown was offered to Cromwell in 1657, it was Owen, Thomas Pride, and others who wrote to the Protector with a strong appeal to refuse the offer. While Cromwell never took up the invitation to rule England outright, he seems to have taken personally Owen’s

---


\(^4\) For details, see Greaves, “Owen, John (1616-1683),” ODNB.

\(^5\) For more specifics, see Winstone, “The Church in Cromwellian England: Initiatives for Reform of the Ministry During the Interregnum.”

\(^6\) For details, see Leggett, “John Owen as Religious Adviser to Oliver Cromwell.”
opposition to it, and some breach of fellowship seems to have taken place.\(^7\)

Chapter 3 also explained Owen’s leading role in the Savoy Assembly (1658), which was most likely a proactive proposal for uniting “the godly” in a Cromwellian church settlement. While the Savoy’s Preface defended Congregationalism and clarified common misconceptions about Congregationalists, it was, nevertheless, a political assembly, possibly even called by Oliver. Owen continued to write and preach in politically proactive ways in the years between Savoy and the Restoration.\(^8\) There has been speculation about whether Owen was involved in the dissolution of Parliament in April 1659, but regardless, his part in seeking to dissuade General Monck from using military force to restore Parliament is undeniable.\(^9\) Whether he was as liked or influential as in previous years is somewhat immaterial — Owen remained on the frontline of political debates and maneuvers in the last year or two of the Protectorate.

With the Restoration in 1660 and the Act of Uniformity in 1662, Owen’s official relationship to the state changed, but his politico-ecclesiastical proactiveness did not. In early 1663, Owen, Thomas Goodwin, and Henry Jessey submitted a declaration to the king appealing for toleration for those who could affirm the Thirty-Nine Articles — as indeed they could.\(^10\) Throughout the 1660s Owen wrote several works in defense of nonconformity, for toleration, and towards Protestant unity.\(^11\)

---

\(^7\) See Toon, God’s Statesman, pp. 98-100.


\(^9\) Greaves, “Owen, John, (1616-1683),” ODNB.

\(^10\) Greaves, “Owen, John, (1616-1683),” ODNB.

By 1668 the moderate nonconformists were somewhat divided. Some, like Richard Baxter, sought comprehension (a united Protestant church-state); others, like Owen, pled for toleration from the state and informal fellowship between churches. Owen remained theoretically open to a possible reunion of England’s Protestants — writing in response to one of Baxter’s proposals, “I am still a well-wisher to these mathematics” — but Owen likely thought that the present ecclesiastical divisions and political hurdles were too large for comprehension; toleration, therefore, being a nearer and more likely possibility.

Details aside, Owen was “at the very centre of the political operations of the Congregationalists” in these years. He submitted several bills on toleration — some of which received careful consideration by the king. According to Greaves, “Charles II consulted him about a possible declaration of indulgence” in 1671. In another similar meeting the king gave Owen 1,000 Guineas to be distributed at his discernment among the most needy nonconformist Puritans. And Owen was certainly the man for that job as he was intimately aware of nonconformist hardships, and personally involved in alleviating what needs he could. This included, in 1677, arranging for John Bunyan’s release from the Bedford jail and seeing to the publication of Bunyan’s Pilgrim Progress.

Of course, throughout the last two decades of his life, Owen wrote many theological, polemical, and spiritual treatises, but his literary attention was never far from ecclesiastical and political

---

14 Greaves, “Owen, John, (1616-1683),” ODNB.
15 Greaves, “Owen, John, (1616-1683),” ODNB.
Conclusion

matters, as a near-constant stream of works, tracts, sermons, and correspondence powerfully attests. And, as the above survey demonstrates, the same can be said for the entirety of Owen’s adult life.

As was pointed out in the Introduction of this study, Owen’s more strictly doctrinal ideas and works have enjoyed a renaissance of attention in recent decades. Christology, atonement, justification, prolegomena, philosophical influences, and many aspects of his Trinitarianism have all received scholarly analysis. There has also been a fair amount of attention to elements of his personal spirituality during the same time. However, there have been no serious treatments of Owen’s ecclesiastical politics over several decades (at least not with Owen as the central focus).


19 In addition to a host of unpublished dissertations, see: Trueman, Claims of Truth; idem, John Owen; de Vries, “Die mij heeft liefgehad;” Rehnman, Divine Discourse; Spence, Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology; Cleveland, Thomism in John Owen.

20 Such as: Ferguson, John Owen on the Christian Life; Beeke, Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation; Gleason, John Owen on Mortification; Griffiths, Redeem the Time; Kapic, Communion with God; Kay, Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God.

21 Though the spotlight is equally shared with Baxter, Owen’s ecclesiastical politics have been given attention in Cooper, John Owen, Richard Baxter. Cooper’s
One of the indirect aims of this study has been to simply demonstrate the importance and prevalence of political, ecclesiological, and eschatological matters in Owen’s works and in his time. More directly, it has sought to make a contribution toward remedying that neglect of his religious politics and views of Christ’s kingdom. Other stated aims of this study will be reviewed in the rest of this chapter, along with a summary of the findings therein.

II. Summary of Findings

A. Setting Up the Kingdom: Confessionalization

Chapter 3 of this study sought to demonstrate what Owen had in mind when he spoke of “the kingdom of Christ” in relationship to a nation and its government. While he had no strong preference for a particularly civil politic — whether Republicanism or monarchism — he was far more concerned that the government serve “the common interest of the saints” and “the propagating of the kingdom of Christ.”22 In the late-1640s and 1650s the so-called “Puritans in power” pursued a national church settlement defined by a confession, parameters for liberty, a definition of orthodoxy, the approbation of and provision for ministers, and thus a hopeful uniting of Protestant or Reformed churches.23

Much scholarly attention has been given to Westminster Assembly’s church-settling efforts — and rightly so.24 However, Westminster was the first of several attempts at settling England’s/Britain’s religion during the English Revolution. Owen and the “Dissenting Brethren” were involved in several legislative

---

22 From Owen’s sermon, “God’s Work in Founding Zion,” (1656) in Works, 8:421.

23 This phrase comes from G.B. Tatham, The Puritans in Power: A Study in the History of the English Church from 1640 to 1660 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1913).

proposals and confessional constructions throughout the 1650s. Because of the relative (or perceived) unsuccessfulness of these confessional attempts, they have been severely neglected by historical theologians. However, they are one representative of a Reformed approach to confessionalization. And, as Richard Muller has suggested, the use of creeds is a key to understanding the development of the Protestant-Reformed tradition: it is “the codification and institutionalization of the Reformation … in continuity and also discontinuity with strands in the religious past, all with elements of response and adaptation to the changing political, social, and intellectual contexts.”

The Humble Proposals (1652) with its sixteen “Principles” of fundamental articles demonstrates a far greater scope of ecclesiastical inclusion than the Presbyterian uniformity that emerged from Westminster. The Arminian John Goodwin agreed with, even celebrated, the theological parameters of the Proposals and “Principles.” Yet, Socinians and Roman Catholics were kept outside of a national church. There were strong impulses to unite “the godly” (evangelicals), while not paving an easy path for the dissemination of heresies in the land.

A year later The Instrument of Government followed many of the same lines as the Humble Proposals. It also borrowed language from the 1649 Officers’ Agreement of the People. Further studies may be able to demonstrate that Owen is an even earlier source, since his 1648 work, Of Toleration, also envisioned a “confession of that truth which [the magistrate] embraceth,” to which “the churches … consent,” to “hold out to these nations” — language shared by both the later Officers’ Agreement and the Instrument. Like the Humble Proposals before, the Instrument too strikes an important note of liberty, eschewing coercion, tyranny, and conformity on matters extra-fundamental.

It has been shown that The New Confession (1654) was the confessional companion to the Instrument. What is interesting

---

25 Muller, After Calvin, p. 47.
26 “Righteous Zeal Encouraged by Divine Protection” (1648), in Works, 8:204 (emphasis added).
Reformed and Reforming

on this point is that *The New Confession* was more theologically specific, more explicitly Reformed in soteriology than the earlier “Principles.” Owen was involved in the authorship of *The New Confession*, as were the typical compatriots. Some scholars have seen 1654 as the start of a shift in Owen’s view of liberty since he favored a more explicitly Reformed church-state by this time. But *The New Confession* represented doctrine to be “owned” and “held out” by an uncoercive magistrate. Liberty was allowed for those who peacefully dissented.

*The Humble Petition and Advice* (1657) was a slightly more conservative vision for the nation’s churches, likely in reaction to the difficulty of prosecuting belligerent and obstinate heretics. While maintaining an uncoercive and persuasive position toward peaceful dissenters, the Petition also envisioned a (yet future) public doctrine, worship, and discipline that could be “owned” by the state. Further, ministerial approbation would require adherence to the nation’s doctrine, but not necessarily its form of worship or government.

The Savoy Assembly (1658) actually intended to produce the confessional companion to the *Humble Petition*. This was argued in Chapter 3 in a number of ways: (1) The Preface to the Savoy documents explained their political reasons for beginning with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (*WCF*) and only making necessary alterations rather than writing from scratch: this not only indentified the Savoyans with Westminster’s thorough orthodoxy, but the *WCF* was the last fully ratified church-state confession. (2) The Savoy Assembly produced two separate documents: the *Declaration of Faith* and the *Declaration of Church Order* — thereby separating doctrine and church polity, just as the *Instrument* articulated. The Savoy Preface explicitly stated that they were following Parliament’s lead in that course of action. (3) Savoy’s documents assumed the continuation of the “public maintenance” for licensed ministers, and maintained the same vision for the magistrate in matters of religion which had been articulated in the earlier legislative/confessional proposals of the decade. (4) Correspondence in planning the assembly points to its official/political nature and intentions. (5) At least one Presbyterian, Matthew Newcomen, wrote in support of the Savoy efforts, viewing it as a means of union between Congregational
Conclusion

and Presbyterian brothers. Once again, the strong intentions to unite under a Protestant-Reformed church are apparent.

However, the Savoy Assembly was made up of Congregationalists and its documents were titled as such—something unusual in comparison with the earlier ecumenical confessional committees of the 1650s. The Preface also explicitly defended Congregationalism, seeking to clear up common misconceptions which were apparently en vogue. It spoke of “our churches” and “our way” in a Congregationally self-identifying way. It also pled for “our liberty” and repeatedly discouraged Presbyterian uniformity.

So was Savoy, then, a defensive move by Congregationalists who were quickly losing political cache in 1658 or a politically-proactive national proposal to fit the parameters laid out in the Instrument the year before? A lengthy string of obscure political references in the Preface (to legislation, ordinances, letters, decisions, and such) provides some answers to the apparent dilemma. A. G. Matthews sought to identify a handful of these many references, but his assumption of the Savoyans as disenfranchised and defensive Republicans may have kept him from taking the references seriously, and thus they never factored into his overall analysis. This study, however, painstakingly sought to identify them in the Journal of the House of Commons and thereby reconstruct the argument made by the Preface. It was concluded that the Savoyans positioned themselves both offensively and defensively. The latter, however, was not a simple appeal to the liberty of conscience or the error of imposition and demanded conformity. It was a political argument that liberty for Congregationalists had already been made law in 1647. So should


29 Preface, SDF, pp. xxiv-xxix.


31 Matthews, ed., The Savoy Declaration, pp. 9-47.
the nation return to Presbyterian (or Episcopal) uniformity, there was a legal precedent for ecclesiastical liberties already in place.

Of course, that argument proved to be a totally ineffective one by 1660-62, but that bare fact misses the point of the Congregationalists’ political proactiveness. Even in a defensive maneuver they were combining theological, logical, and political arguments. They were simultaneously seeking possible comprehension with Presbyterians and Baptists, while preparing themselves (Congregationalists) for possible disenfranchisement and/or persecution.

Though terribly neglected by historians and theologians, Savoy’s Preface is also an important historical document for its many comments about confessions, confessionalization, confessional assemblies, and creed-making. While the doctrine of the Savoy Declaration of Faith (SDF) is an explicitly orthodox confession — sharing very much in common with the best of the British and European Reformed creeds — the Preface’s vision for confessions and creed-making is a more progressive one. It emphasized: ongoing retesting of doctrine, the possible improvement of theological conclusions, and the worth of restating confessions or “confessing anew.” This was according to “new light” — which, as was shown in Chapter 5 of this study, had eschatological overtones for Owen.

The content of Savoy’s doctrine was far from novel or unorthodox. In that sense, Savoy squarely places Owen within a traditional Reformed Orthodox heritage, and thereby confirming the portrait painted in many studies of his theology. However, his self-suspicion for theological error, his insistence on the fallibility of creeds and confessional assemblies, his celebration of re-testing and re-articulating doctrines, and his experiential, even eschatological, orientation to confessions and confessional formulation has been conspicuously absent in studies of his theology.

Chapter 3 also explored possible sources for or influences on Owen’s views on liberty, the magistrate, uniting Protestant churches, fundamental articles, creeds and creed-making. While a conclusion cannot be dogmatically drawn, a suggestion was made for the Dutch Remonstrants and Simon Episcopius as possible influences — not simply because Owen shared a dozen or so ideals
with them (though he did in remarkable detail), but because Owen twice made reference to the Remonstrants, Episcopius, Vedelius, and several of their documents when referring to his own evolution on liberty/toleration. Yet, whatever similarities are found between Owen and the Dutch Arminians, and whatever influence may or may not have taken place, Owen’s explicit reference to these men and their documents demonstrates the international scope of theological trade in his day. The Remonstrants and Owen had, of course, their very unique contexts— their own challenges, threats, opportunities, etc. They also had quite different theological bases for their views. But Owen had much in common with their politico-ecclesiastical views, and he was obviously aware of that fact.

As for Owen’s views of these matters in post-Restoration years, his plea for toleration and defense of nonconformity continued to distinguish between the strictly doctrinal and matters of ecclesiastical practice (forms of worship and polity). He stressed his fidelity to the State’s doctrine of the Thirty-Nine Articles, but pled for liberty in matters of church practice. It may seem like an ironic full-circle that Owen insisted on his agreement with (even warm appreciation for) the Thirty-Nine Articles in later years, but he truly could assent to the Articles’ softly Reformed tenets—and thus it was no inconsistency with his earlier (more preferable, more proactive) confessional ideals. While the hopes of a godly church-state were out of reach in the Restoration years, his basic personal convictions about liberty and the magistrate remained the same. Nevertheless, as the late-1640s and 1650s make clear, his view of liberty was not a reactionary political defense which grew out of persecution; he voiced the same cries and pleas in his earliest Parliamentary sermons.

In later years, he only questioned the continuation of a future church-state for England when Roman Catholicism was knocking on England’s door in 1680, and the dismantling of the national ecclesiastical structure seemed to be the only hope for preserving the gospel in the nation.
B. The Keys of the Kingdom: Church Government

Chapter 4 gave significant focus on Owen’s move from Presbyterian to Congregational church polity. The autobiographical account of his evolution was thoroughly examined, not only for the ecclesiological insights, but for more general theological ones as well. His thorough and scholastic approach to theological investigation via “sundry books” and scriptural interpretation did not lead him to the conclusion which he initially anticipated. Having entered the examination to refute Congregationalism he was instead convinced of it. John Cotton’s Keys of the Kingdom provided primary (extra-scriptural) influence, according to Owen. He was not an uninformed or unaware Congregationalist in 1643, as some have suggested. A conscious conversion took place after reading Cotton’s Keys, and by mid-1646 he was a convinced and practicing Congregationalist.

The account of Owen’s ecclesiological evolution comes from a printed debate with the Presbyterian Daniel Cawdrey. The latter charged Owen with inconsistencies between his recent work (in 1657) and an earlier one (in 1643). Their exchange highlights important cultural and religious dynamics of the mid-seventeenth century. Whereas Owen gladly owned a shift on liberty and ecclesiology, Cawdrey ridiculed it, owing it to fickleness and being overly interested in novelty. For the more traditionalist Cawdrey there was something shameful about a theological reversal. Of course, it must be clarified here again that Owen’s theological positions (whether earlier or later) were not overly novel in his day. He did not favor the new simply because it was new. But to say that his epistemological progressiveness had judicious restraints is not to also imply that he was not more progressive than Cawdrey. That is precisely the point they were debating.

From another angle, Owen’s response to Cawdrey has raised a number of questions for scholars and led to a variety of proposals.

---

32 Owen addresses this in both A Vindication of the Treatise about the True Nature of Schism (1657), in Works, 13:223-24, and An Answer to a Late Treatise of Mr Cawdrey (1658), in Works, 13:292.

33 The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished (1643), in Works, 13:1-49.
for indentifying Owen’s earliest ecclesiological views, the timing of his transition, and the relationship or proximity between his earlier and later convictions. Through a more careful study of his single pre-Congregationalist work it was concluded that Owen’s earliest ecclesiology followed the typical Presbyterian lines of interpretation. However, his affinity for and encouragement of a robust practice of fellowship or member-ministry aligns him more closely with the culture of Congregationalists, at least in this point of practice. Presbyterians did not pervasively encourage, much less emphasize, this duty, whereas Congregationalists of the mid-seventeenth century wrote abundantly on it. This helps explain why Owen’s accounting to Cawdrey sometimes acknowledged a party-change, while at other times stressed the continuity of his ecclesiological convictions over the years. Where Owen’s response stressed continuity this chapter suggested that his broader interest in uniting “the godly” of England laid behind his softer aims.

Owen’s broader interest in Protestant unity has not only been demonstrated by the confessional-constitutional attempts in the 1650s, but also by his published proposal in 1649 for a comprehensive Protestant church settlement to unite Presbyterians and Congregationalists in England. His ecumenical interests however did not suggest a flattening out of ecclesiological differences or an indifference to the robust exercise of Congregationalism in his own church and area. His ministry in Coggeshall (1646-49) included both a public parish ministry and a “gathered” church of visible saints, covenanted together for the practice of the true marks of the church.

He also was part of an informal regional network of pastors which routinely gathered to discuss points of ecclesiology, national reform and comprehension, and to pray. As such, this study has joined other recent voices to argue that “Independent” is not an apt label for those like Owen who preferred the term Congregationalist. Their relationship to other churches was not purely “Independent,” nor was their correlation to the state.

---

34 In Chapter 3 of this work.
While space would not permit a full examination of Owen’s full-bloom Congregationalism in all of its parts and practices (which would occupy a full dissertation or monograph by itself), attention was focused to two questions for Owen’s Congregationalism: (1) the question of the nature of the church, whether it was simply “visible” or also “catholic-visible;” and (2) the question of the authority of the church, whether the keys of the kingdom in Matt. 16:19 had been given by Christ to the saints or to the ministers. The scholarship on seventeenth century ecclesiology has increasingly become clear about how important those questions were for the exegetical and practical differences between the key ecclesiological parties. This was especially true for the debates at Westminster Assembly.36

Of course, Owen attested (more than once) that Cotton’s *Keyes of the Kingdom* was decisive for his move to Congregationalism, and the key to Cotton’s *Keyes* is “the keys of the kingdom” in Matt. 16:19. Closely related is the nature of the church. At the risk of over-generalizing, most Presbyterians saw the “keys” of authority having been given to the catholic-visible church which represented ministers, while Congregationalists generally believed that the “keys” had been given to believers of a visible church. While Owen agreed with the catholic-visible category, he defined it, as did the SDF, as “The whole body of men throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel.”37 It was not limited to ministers, nor was it an ecclesiastical authority over local churches as Presbyterians held. Owen followed the typically Congregational lines of interpretation on this point.

That said, regarding the recipients of the keys of the kingdom, Owen’s thought is far more complicated. This chapter sought to show that, on the one hand, Owen’s approach to the “keys” is simpler than many of the complex constructions of multiple distinctions that his contemporaries proposed. On the other hand, his view is complexly and confusingly stated, and may not be consistent. Possible inconsistencies cannot be explained as another shift or change in his interpretation, since it is sometimes

36 See Powell, “The Dissenting Brethren and the Power of the Keys.”
37 SDF, chap. 26.2.
Conclusion

within the same work that he alternately attributes the “keys” to the members and then more strictly to the ministers directly from Christ. However, there does seem to be a general trend that it was in later years that Owen increasingly emphasized the ministers or elders as the recipients and primary administrators of the “keys.”

These ambiguities, if not unanswered questions, to Owen’s ecclesiology may be frustrating for readers, but I have purposefully resisted forcing Owen into a neat mold. Perhaps future studies will better determine a more complete understanding of Owen’s view of the “keys.” What can be inferred at this point is that while Owen has since been viewed as something of a quintessential Congregationalist — uniquely influential on whatever success Congregationalism had in the years that followed — his treatment of the “keys” was not always quintessential or typical.

However, none of these ambiguities or abnormalities place Owen’s ecclesiology outside of legitimate Congregationalism. He did not, as some have suggested, return to Presbyterianism later in life. His view of the “keys” never necessarily demanded Presbyterian hierarchy, nor did he ever abandon his belief in the centrality of visible churches in which saints volitionally gather in covenant with each other and consent to the rule of elders.

This chapter also returned to the earlier theme of liberty to explore its relationship to Congregational ecclesiology. Owen and Cotton were compared once again — not because Cotton was causally influential on Owen’s view of liberty (if he was there is no extant evidence), but because the two transatlantic figures have often been viewed differently on liberty — Owen as the more tolerant of the two. The chapter concluded that Owen and Cotton share essentially the same lines for liberty/toleration, persuasion vs. coercion, the need to limit heresy for the protection of the saints and the gospel, etc. There are different tones and different emphases between the two Puritans, indeed, but these differences can almost solely be attributed to their different contexts and circumstances. Understandably, Cotton’s polemical debate with Roger Williams looked very different than Owen’s defense of liberty and nonconformity during the years of

38 Lee, John Owen Represbyterianized; cf., Works, 16:2.
Reformed and Reforming

ecclesiastical imposition (post-1662). Nevertheless, they saw the lines of liberty, ecclesiology, worship, gospel preservation and gospel promotion strongly intertwined. Their view of worship and membership went hand in glove with a view of political liberty, since there must be a “freeness” to ecclesiastical practice.

C. The Coming of the Kingdom: The Latter-Day

Chapter 5 of this study began by noting the vast diversity with which scholars have understood Owen’s eschatology. The most predominant assessment has been that Owen’s eschatology of latter-day glory (LDG), being politically and providentially tied to the optimistic circumstances of the Revolution and Protectorate, necessarily faltered in the disenfranchising circumstances following the Restoration. This interpretation is likely owing to a broader historiographical tendency to draw a strict line on 1660, viewing the decades before and after as very different epistemological environments. This has had a heightened effect on the study of seventeenth century apocalyptic thought specifically. While this historiography has been rightly reassessed in more recent studies of Puritan apocalyptic thought, Owen’s eschatology has never enjoyed a proper reassessment.

Much attention in this chapter was given to the dozen or so lists of eschatological expectations that Owen proposed in his writings, sermons, and in the SDF. While not identical, they very similarly list the components of Owen’s end-time expectations for the LDG: Antichrist destroyed, the Jews called, the shaking of kingdoms, the gospel spreading in the world, churches growing in free worship and further light. These lists of eschatological expectations are found throughout Owen’s Works and on both sides of 1660. In fact, just as many are found in post-Restoration works as earlier ones. In general, it would be misguided to say that Owen speaks/writes any less apocalyptically in later years than earlier years. This should sufficiently prove that the content of his eschatological belief did not change in years of nonconformity, neither did his general interest in apocalyptic thought. The only alteration is more of an added nuance: in the persecuted days of the Restoration Owen more often includes an expectation of suffering/tribulation as part of living in the last days. But even
this is witness to his ongoing interest to interpret and apply providential “alterations, dissolutions, shakings, changings, [and] removals” in eschatological terms.39

However misguided his (or others’) eschatological optimism was in the 1640-50s, his Parliamentary sermons and the events surrounding them provide a clear window into the Puritan hope and struggle for England’s long reformation at the time. Owen’s eschatological expectations — Antichrist destroyed, Jews called, adversaries broken, churches enlarged and edified, etc. — are the interpretive keys to a host of ideas and ideals of the Puritan Revolution, such as: the interest of liberty, opposition to ecclesiastical persecution, the readmission of the Jews to England, the pursuit of Protestant unity, the deliberations about purer ecclesiology and worship, and of course the gospel being sent to and spreading about in the world. While Owen may have been indifferent to the Jews’ readmission to England (instead favoring their eschatological return to Jerusalem), his closeness to and affirmation of the king’s execution was unmistakable. In all likelihood he was preaching for its need at least four months before any official document was alluding to the regicide. On the whole, military victories over the king, the (occasional) success and progress of parliaments, and the removal of heavy-handed ecclesiastical conformity were all interpreted as signs that Christ’s enemies were indeed being “broken.” These events signaled the “shaking and translating” of the nations for the interests of Christ.

For all of his hopeful optimism in the 1640-50s, however, Chapter 5 also showed that subtle eschatological underpinnings in Owen’s thought and sermons made it possible for him to avoid a total recantation in the Restoration years. Unlike many of his contemporaries he never made “computations” or set dates for biblical prophecy; in fact, he warned of the danger of doing so both before and after the Restoration. Though he unblushingly interpreted circumstances as providential and apocalyptic signs, he often qualified his optimism with conditions and admonitions (e.g., personal holiness, unity, etc.). His hopefulness for England

was regularly juxtaposed with warnings about an alternative future, should its leaders lose sight of the highest goals (e.g., liberty, reformation of the churches, sending the gospel, etc.). God would then bring judgment and purification rather than light, glory, and peace. Of course, the Restoration, with all of its political unease and Puritan persecution, was just that in Owen’s mind—divine judgment and discipline. There was a theological explanation for it.

Whether in days of power or persecution Owen’s eschatology was strongly intertwined with his views of liberty, ecclesiology, worship, and missions. Those ideas and ideals had an eschatological hope. In fact, it may be fair to say that eschatology was the glue which held the parts of his ecclesiastical politics together. And all of this together comprised a comprehensive application of the kingdom of Christ.

III. Aims and Assessment

This analysis has sought to examine the kingdom of God—and particularly the intersection of national politics, ecclesiology, and eschatology—in the thought and context of Owen. The above section summarizes those findings, and hopefully begins to redress the scholarly neglect of Owen’s ecclesiastical-politics. But other secondary aims of this study were suggested in Chapter 1. These will be reviewed and given some resolution in this final section of the Conclusion.

As the title of this study implies, this has been a study of reformation—of England’s struggle for further reformation in the mid-seventeenth century, and of Owen’s own theological reflection, reevaluation, and refinement in each of these three areas. Some changes in Owen’s thought have been noted by previous studies, but often not sufficiently analyzed (ecclesiology). Other ideas went through a stated alteration, but have not been noticed or explored by scholars (liberty/toleration). For at least one area of his thought, most scholars have assumed a modification took place, but without adequate evidence (eschatology). This study has sought to rectify these shortcomings with a chronologically sensitive analysis. Far too often in studies of Owen (or his contemporaries) an almost timeless approach is
taken, and documents are not dated, much less sufficiently contextualized.

Incidentally, this static approach to investigation is problematic for analyses of ecclesiology, politics, or any other doctrine. Again, as John Coffey pointed out:

[Owen’s] sermons and tracts (and even his treatises) were also interventions in particular controversies and they bear the mark of a specific moment. ... Owen scholarship has typically collated his writings from across the years in order to establish his position .... But it is also worth attending closely to chronology and context, and asking what Owen was trying to achieve by publications in 1646, 1649, 1652 or 1659.

In other words, some of Owen’s most rigorous theological treatises had stated polemical aims, whether aimed at Arminians, Socinians, Quakers, or Catholics. Some works have no stated opponent, but surrounding circumstances, correspondence, and clues in the work itself betray its polemical intentions — and hence its national implications. While focus in this study has been on Owen’s writings and sermons related to politics, ecclesiology, and eschatology, the rich contextual circumstances involved have been always in view. It is hoped that this would encourage theologians to apply the advice of Coffey for contextualized studies of Owen which are more attentive to possible changes or developments in his thought.\(^{40}\)

Past theological interest in Owen can in some cases be attributed to his contribution to the “Calvin and the Calvinists” discussion and debate. Owen has been a litmus test for scholars arguing for discontinuity in the Reformation; even more so for those arguing for basic continuity of Reformation theology. The latter have convincingly made the case, and specifics do not need

to be rehearsed here.\textsuperscript{41} However, the discussion of continuity and discontinuity between the Reformers and Reformed Orthodox has centered solely on a key set of doctrinal \textit{loci} and/or methodological issues.\textsuperscript{42} Granted, the work of continuity-scholars has largely and necessarily been reactionary to the earlier work of the discontinuity-theorists: in many ways, the earlier arguments for discontinuity set the theological playing field for topics and parameters.\textsuperscript{43} However, when the question of dis-/continuity is approached more purely, matters of theological \textit{practice} might also be fair litmus tests — e.g., politics, liberty, confessionalization, and a host of ecclesiological issues, with eschatology also intertwined.

Perhaps it is so obvious as to need no mention, but rarely are the areas of practical theology noted in comparisons of the Reformers and the Reformed, let alone with their differences highlighted. This analysis has not attempted to demonstrate Calvin’s (or other Reformers’) views of civil liberty, church polity, or eschatology. For better or worse, Calvin’s views have been assumed in the backdrop, in order to give more focused attention to Owen and his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{44} But, in part, this has been done with an eye to the question of continuity, discontinuity, and/or development of the broader Reformed movement. While Owen shared Calvin’s view of the magistrate’s duty in religious affairs, he made departures from the Reformer on liberty, church polity, and eschatology. Certainly, like his Reformed contemporaries, Owen had great respect for the first Reformers. However, he could also say,

\begin{quote}
There was a reformation attempted, and attained in some measure, by some nations or churches in the last ages, from the corruption
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{42} See Muller, \textit{PRRD}; idem, \textit{After Calvin}; Trueman and Clark, eds., \textit{Protestant Scholasticism}; van Asselt and Dekker, eds., \textit{Reformation and Scholasticism}; van Asselt, ed., \textit{Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism}.

\textsuperscript{43} For example: Hall, “Calvin Against the Calvinists;” Armstrong, \textit{Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy}; Kendall, \textit{Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649}.

\textsuperscript{44} For an entry point into the primary and secondary literature on these matters in Calvin’s thought see the relevant chapters in Herman J. Selderhuis, ed., \textit{The Calvin Handbook} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009).
and impositions of the church of Rome. However, none of them ever pretended that it was complete or perfect, according to the pattern of the Scripture, as unto the institution and discipline of the churches; no, nor yet to the example of the primitive church ...\footnote{Works, 15:349.}

The relationship between the first and later generations of the Reformed naturally extends to the nature of the Reformation project itself. The question of “further reformation” is a thorny matter, as are the Reformed or reforming identities and intentions of Owen and his contemporaries. This study has sought to use Owen as something of a test case for the broader questions of further or ongoing reformation, and Reformed/reforming identities. The oft-cited slogan “\emph{semper reformanda}” has certainly been misunderstood and abused ever since it was first used by Jodocus van Lodenstein in 1674, as recent studies have ably demonstrated.\footnote{See especially Michael Bush, “Calvin and the Reformanda Sayings,” in \emph{Calvinus Sacrarum Literarum Intepres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research}, Herman J. Selderhuis, ed. (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), pp. 285-99.} In extant print, Owen never referred to the saying. He certainly would be suspicious of a never-ending Reformation that turned to novelty rather than truth. However, neither did he speak of “farther reformation” or “reforming” only in terms of England’s ecclesiastical shortcomings which needed reparation at the Revolution. At times he spoke of the ongoing reformation in terms of doctrine, new exegetical insight, and further theological clarity. Michael Bush may very well be correct when he asserts that for Calvin, Lodenstein, and others \emph{reformanda} was not “a way for the church to remind itself of the need to be humble in theological self-examination.”\footnote{“Calvin and the Reformanda Sayings,” p. 299.} However, the same cannot be said of Owen who \emph{did} speak affirmingly in such ways.

For some that will locate Owen somewhere outside of the acceptable confines of Reformed Orthodoxy. For others, however, Owen’s views must be accounted for as one approach to reformation in the Reformed tradition. Further, it is important to note that Owen could variously look forward or backward for a
basis for his epistemology: it could have an eschatological motivation which anticipated a new and greater day dawning; or it could lean upon the medieval scholastic categories of theologia ectypa and theologia viatorum for his understanding of the Christian life (and theology) as a pilgrimage. He was Reformed and reforming.

---

48 For Owen’s treatment of these scholastic categories, see Theologoumena Pantadpa (1661), in Works, 17:42-45; Rehnman, Divine Discourse, p. 170ff. For analysis of the broader Medieval and Reformed traditions, see Van Asselt, “The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology.”
Summary

This study focuses on the theme of the kingdom of Christ in the thought, activity, and context of John Owen (1616-1683). For Owen, the kingdom of Christ is the realm of Christ’s rule experienced internally and personally in individual Christians; however, more collectively, this kingdom is externally manifested in ecclesiastical politics, local churches, and the eschatological anticipation of an age of “latter-day glory.” These matters are significantly interrelated and overlapping in Owen’s sermons and writings. Likewise, England’s struggles for “further reformation” in the volatile mid-seventeenth century (roughly 1640s-80s), gave birth to a variety of ideals and proposals for liberty/toleration, confessionalization, Protestant unity, ecclesiastical power and polity – with eschatological interpretations and anticipations often in the background, if not the forefront. This study not only seeks to assess the interrelationship of these matters in Owen’s thought and context, but also analyze any development or change that may or may not have taken place in Owen’s personal beliefs about liberty/toleration, local church polity, and the end-times.

Chapter 1 introduces the significance of such a study by surveying the relevant secondary literature. While Owen has in recent decades enjoyed a renaissance of scholarly attention among historical theologians, their studies have focused on more strictly doctrinal matters of his thought. However, more practical matters – especially political/ecclesiastical endeavors and writings – have been sorely neglected. Simultaneously, early modern historians have more recently emphasized the religious orientation to England’s upheavals in mid-seventeenth century. Owen’s significance in these times and events has increasingly been appreciated. However, their studies, which often survey a theme or debate in a given decade, cannot possibly give sufficient attention to one figure’s theological nuances, connections, and/or changes. In short, the sheer number of works Owen published on ecclesiology and ecclesiastical politics may be unrivaled by any
other category of his thought, and yet it has been over 40 years since a study on Owen has focused on these important matters. No scholar has yet to couch these issues together (as Owen does) under the overarching theme of the kingdom of Christ.

Chapter 2 provides a brief biographical sketch of Owen, highlighting those events, developments, and documents which help to situate the more in-depth analyses of the chapters that follow. Indeed, three main, lengthy chapters follow, making up the body of this study. These build upon each other, with successive chapters returning to earlier themes in order to make additional connections and observations.

Chapter 3 (“Setting Up the Kingdom: The Theology and Politics of Confessionalization”) gives attention to ecclesiastical politics on the national, legislative level. The interrelated matters of liberty/toleration, Protestant unity, the vetting of ministers, and confessionalization all came together in the 1650s when the so-called “Puritans in power” made various attempts at a new national church settlement — one less prescriptive than Westminster Assembly’s, yet not aloof to heresies. With varying success, but with never any lasting success, these confessional-legislative proposals culminated in the Savoy Assembly (1658), and it is here that the majority of this chapter’s attention is given. The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order has largely been viewed as a defensive, separatist statement of Congregationalist belief and practice, but this chapter argues that it was a more politically proactive endeavor. The lengthy Preface (among other pieces of evidence) helps to explain the assumptions and aims of the Savoy delegates. Most likely authored by Owen, the Preface also provides substantial commentary on their assumed approach to confessions and confessionalization. While the doctrinal content of the Savoy Declaration seldom breaks from Westminster’s Confession, the Preface’s confessional vision is more progressive in multiple ways, which this chapter lays out.

This chapter also seeks to explore possible sources for Owen’s preferred parameters for confessionalization and ecclesiastical politics. From a previously unutilized autobiographical account, a possible solution is found in a surprising source. It is also in this personal account that Owen states explicitly that his view of liberty/toleration went through a change in the mid-1640s.
However, in examining his writings in the post-Restoration years (1660ff) — when Puritans of Owen’s ilk were no longer in power, but marginalized and even persecuted — it is shown that Owen’s ideals did not change under those very different circumstances.

Chapter 4 (“The Keys of the Kingdom: The Nature, Power, and Government of the Church”) looks to Owen’s local church polity. It is here that another autobiographical account retells of his of conversion to Congregationalism (from Presbyterianism). This move in ecclesioloogy has often been noted in Owen studies; however, it has been variously understood and never examined carefully. The specifics of his earlier and later ecclesiologies are studied in this chapter, as is the precise timing of this shift in church polity. Owen attributes his move to Congregationalism in large part to John Cotton’s The Keyes of the Kingdom of Christ; thus, the keys of the kingdom (a la Matt. 16:19) becomes crucial to his ecclesiological conversion and a frequent topic in his later Congregationalist writings. However, careful study of these later works indicates that Owen was not as consistent and/or carefully nuanced as many of his Congregationalist colleagues in his interpretation of the recipients of the keys of the kingdom. While his church polity never reverted to Presbyterianism, as some have posited, he did not always follow the more typical lines of Congregationalist thought. This chapter also returns to the earlier theme of liberty/toleration to assess possible connections between the Congregationalists’ ecclesiology and view(s) of liberty. Owen and Cotton are compared on this score as well. It is here that the thorny issue of execution for heresy is explored, with the infamous Miguel Servetus serving as a test-case. It is argued that, though history has generally viewed Cotton as less than tolerant, his basic convictions are essentially the same as Owen’s, and differing contexts better explain any perceived differences between the two transatlantic Puritans.

Chapter 5 (“The Coming of the Kingdom: Eschatology and its Political-Ecclesiastical Significance”) turns to Owen’s eschatological understanding of the kingdom of Christ. For Owen, the kingdom is manifested outwardly throughout the church age, but more increasingly and intensely as it approaches and enters an era of “latter-day glory.” This optimistic eschatology (like its close relative, millenarianism) was conducive to
interpreting providential circumstances in order to gauge the proximity of this latter-day. Thus, the puritanically-optimistic circumstances of the Revolution and Protectorate years bred great eschatological interest and anticipation, not least for Owen who had risen to the highest level of religio-political influence in the late-1640s and 1650s. This chapter explores Owen’s sermons of that time, which were teeming with eschatological fervor and political playmaking. Historians since have largely underestimated his involvement and influence. This is demonstrated in several ways, not least Owen’s public call for the king’s execution, which he interpreted as an eschatological necessity.

Many scholars have assumed that the great reversal of fortunes that took place in post-Restoration and Puritan-persecuted years was too much for the hopeful, circumstantially-tied eschatology. Many have since assumed Owen’s eschatology (and/or politics) necessarily went through modification under such defeated circumstances. However, this interpretation is likely leaning too heavily on an older model of historiography for Puritan eschatology. This chapter argues instead that Owen’s eschatology was not significantly altered in later years. Owen similarly summarized the basic tenets of his end-time beliefs throughout his writings, even in his final years. Further, it is shown that his earlier optimism was also punctuated with qualifications and interpretive cautions which allowed for the possibility of a more bleak future. Unlike others, he never quite painted himself into a corner with eschatological predictions. While the age of “latter-day glory” seemed possibly close in the 1650s, and not as close in the trying decades that followed, the basic theses of his eschatological anticipation never changed. In fact, whether before or after that great divide of 1660, Owen saw eschatology as formative to and intertwined with his views of liberty, Protestant unity, local church polity, worship, the need for further reformation in England, and the spread of the gospel beyond.

Chapter 6, in conclusion, summarizes the findings of the previous chapters, highlighting the discoveries and interpretations which are unique to this study. It concludes that Owen’s view of the kingdom of Christ was multi-faceted, with eschatology functioning as the connective tissue holding together many ideas
Summary

for church, nation, and reformation. The final assessment is that, on these matters, Owen can be described as one Reformed and reforming.
Samenvatting

Deze studie richt zich op de betekenis van het koninkrijk van Christus in het denken, het werken en de context van John Owen (1616-1683). Voor Owen is het koningschap van Christus de heerschappij van Christus zoals die innerlijk en persoonlijk in individuele christenen ervaren wordt. Dit koninkrijk is echter evenzeer structureel zichtbaar in kerkelijk beleid, in plaatselijke kerken en in de eschatologische anticipatie van een tijdperk van de glorie van de laatste dagen. Beide aspecten zijn duidelijk verweven en overlappen elkaar in de preken en geschriften van Owen. Evenzeer gaven de strijd voor nadere reformatie in het turbulente midden van de zeventiende eeuw (ruwweg 1640-1690) het licht aan een verscheidenheid van ideeën en voorstellen voor vrijheid en tolerantie, voor confessionalisatie, voor eenheid van protestanten en voor kerkelijke macht en kerkelijk beleid, met dikwijls eschatologische interpretaties en anticipaties op de achtergrond of zelfs op de voorgrond. Deze studie tracht niet alleen de relaties tussen deze factoren in het denken en de context van Owen na te gaan, maar ook alle ontwikkelingen en veranderingen die al dan niet hebben plaatsgevonden in Owens eigen gedachten over vrijheid en tolerantie, plaatselijk kerkelijk beleid en de eindtijd te analyseren.

In hoofdstuk 1 wordt het belang van de studie aangegeven met de status questionis en een overzicht van de relevante literatuur. Bij de toegenomen belangstelling voor Owen in het onderzoek naar de geschiedenis van de theologie was de aandacht vooral gericht op strikt dogmatische onderwerpen in zijn gedachtegoed. Meer praktische aandachtspunten, in het bijzonder zijn politieke en kerkelijke activiteiten en geschriften, zijn echter steeds naargelang gegeven. Tegelijkertijd hebben historici gespecialiseerd in de vroegmoderne tijd recentelijk de godsdienstige invloed in de conflicten in het Engeland van het midden van de zeventiende eeuw benadrukt. De betekenis van Owen daarin wordt steeds meer onderkend. Deze studies, die dikwijls een overzicht van een
Reformed and Reforming

thema of debat geven, kunnen echter onvoldoende aandacht schenken aan zijn theologische nuances, verbindingen en veranderingen. Hoewel louter in aantal geen enkel ander thema ook maar in de schaduw kan staan van de werken die Owen publiceerde over ecclesiologie en kerkelijk beleid, is het al meer dan veertig jaar geleden dat een studie over Owen deze belangrijke thema’s als onderwerp had. En geen enkele studie tot nu toe heeft deze onderwerpen samengebracht onder het overkoepelende thema van het koninkrijk van Christus, zoals Owen dat doet.

In hoofdstuk 2 wordt een korte biografische schets van Owen gegeven. Daarin worden de gebeurtenissen, ontwikkelingen en documenten aangegeven die van belang zijn om de verdere analyse in de drie daarop volgende lange hoofdstukken te plaatsen, die de kern van deze studie vormen. Deze hoofdstukken ondersteunen elkaar, waarbij thema’s uit eerdere hoofdstukken opnieuw worden opgenomen in nieuwe verbanden en met nieuwe observaties.

Hoofdstuk 3 richt zich op het kerkelijke beleid op het nationale wetgevende niveau. Vrijheid en tolerantie, de eenheid van de protestanten, het toezicht op predikanten en confessionalisatie, die onderling verweven zijn, kwamen alle samen in de jaren vijftig van de zeventiende eeuw toen de zogenaamde ‘puriteinen aan de macht’ verschillende pogingen ondernamen voor een nieuwe nationale kerkelijke orde. Deze orde zou minder strikt moeten zijn dan die van de Westminster Assembly, maar zeker niet onverschillig ten aanzien van ketterijen. Met wisselend succes maar nooit met duurzaam gevolg kwamen deze confessionele wetgevende voorstellen tot een hoogtepunt in de Savoy Assembly (1658). Daaraan is het grootste deel van dit hoofdstuk gewijd. De Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order wordt gewoonlijk geïnterpreteerd als een defensieve, separatistische stellingname van congregationalistische overtuigingen en praktijken. In dit hoofdstuk wordt echter beargumenteerd dat het veeleer een politieke proactieve onderneming was. De uitvoerige Preface helpt (naast andere elementen van bewijs) om de aannames en doelstellingen van de vertegenwoordigers naar de Savoy Assembly te verstaan. De Preface, die hoogstwaarschijnlijk door Owen is geconcipieerd, geeft ook substantieel inzicht in hun veronderstelde benadering van belijdenissen en confessionalisatie. Hoewel de leerstellige inhoud van de Savoy Declaration zelden
afwijkt van de Westminster Confession, is, zoals dit hoofdstuk uiteenzet, de confessionele visie van de Preface in velerlei opzichten progressiever.

Dit hoofdstuk tracht ook na te gaan wat de mogelijke bronnen van Owens voorkeursopties voor confessionalisatie en kerkelijk beleid zijn. In een niet eerder gebruikt autobiografische verslag is een onverwachte bron gevonden als een mogelijke antwoord op deze vraag. In dit persoonlijke verslag meldt Owen expliciet dat zijn visie op vrijheid en tolerantie in het midden van de jaren veertig van de zeventiende eeuw veranderde. Als men echter zijn geschriften van de jaren na de Restauratie (de jaren zestig, toen de puriteinen van het soort van Owen niet langer aan de macht waren, maar gemarginaliseerd waren en zelfs vervolgd werden) nagaat, dan blijkt dat zijn ideeën niet veranderden onder deze zeer moeilijke omstandigheden.

Hoofdstuk 4 richt zich op Owens beleid voor de plaatselijke kerken. Op dit punt informeert een ander autobiografisch verslag ons van zijn bekering van presbyterianisme naar congregationalisme. Deze verschuiving in ecclesiologie wordt in studies over Owen vaak vermeld. Deze wordt echter verschillend geïnterpreteerd en is nog nooit zorgvuldig onderzocht. De karakteristieken van zijn vroegere en latere ecclesiologie zijn het onderwerp van dit hoofdstuk, net als het precieze tijdstip van deze verschuiving in kerkrechtelijk opzicht.

Owen schrijft zijn wending naar het congregationalisme grotendeels toe aan John Cottons The Keyes of the Kingdom of Christ. Daardoor worden de 'sleutelen van het hemelrijk’ (Matt. 16:19) crucial voor zijn ecclesiologische omkeer en een veel voorkomend onderwerp in zijn latere ecclesiologische geschriften. Zorgvuldig onderzoek van deze latere werken brengt echter aan het licht dat Owen niet zo consistent en/of zo nauwkeurig genuanceerd was in zijn interpretatie van de ontvangers van de sleutels van het koninkrijk als vele van zijn congregationalistische collega’s. Hoewel hij wat betreft zijn kerkrechtelijke inzichten nooit terugkeerde tot het presbyteriansme, zoals sommigen stellen, volgde hij evenmin de typische lijnen van het congregationalistische denken.

Dit hoofdstuk pakt ook de draad weer op van het eerdere thema van vrijheid en tolerantie om mogelijke verbindingen

Hoofdstuk 5 gaat over Owens eschatologische verstaan van het koninkrijk van Christus. Volgens hem wordt het koninkrijk uitwendig historisch zichtbaar in de hele tijd van de kerk, maar toenemend en intenser als die de glorie van de laatste dagen ('the latter-day glory') nadert en binnengaat. Deze optimistische eschatologie was richtinggevend bij het interpreteren van gebeurtenissen die als Gods leiding werden gezien om daardoor de nabijheid van deze laatste dagen te peilen. Dientengevolge brachten de uit het oogpunt van de puriteinen optimistische gebeurtenissen van de revolutie en de jaren van het protectoraat een grote eschatologische interesse voort en een tendens tot anticipatie, niet in het minst voor Owen die in de late jaren veertig en de jaren vijftig van die eeuw was gestegen tot het hoogste niveau van zijn godsdienstig politieke invloed. In dit hoofdstuk worden zijn preken uit die tijd onderzocht, die vol waren van eschatologische gloed en van politieke beïnvloeding. Historici hebben zijn betrokkenheid en invloed grootelijks onderschat. Dat wordt op verschillende manieren aangetoond, niet het minst door Owens publieke oproep tot de executie van de koning, welke hij interpreteerde als een eschatologische noodzakelijkheid.

Veel onderzoekers hebben aangenomen dat de grote omkeer die plaatsvond in de periode na de restauratie en van vervolging van de puriteinen te veel was voor hun hoopvol gestemde en door de omstandigheden bepaalde eschatologie. Velen hebben daarom aangenomen dat Owens eschatologie (en/of politieke inzichten) door een proces van herziening gegaan zijn in zulke omstandigheden. Deze interpretatie steunt echter te zwaar op een
ouder model; van geschiedschrijving voor de puriteinse eschatologie. In dit hoofdstuk wordt aangetoond dat, integendeel, de eschatologie van Owen in later jaren niet significant gewijzigd is. Hij blijft op vergelijkbare wijze de basale trekken van zijn opvattingen over de eindtijd samenvatten, zelfs tot in zijn laatste levensjaren. Verder wordt aangetoond dat zijn vroegere optimisme werd aangescherpt met kwalificaties en interpretatieve waarschuwingen waarin rekening gehouden kon worden met een mogelijk somberder toekomst. Anders dan anderen heeft hij zich nooit laten brengen tot eschatologische voorspellingen. Ook al leek het tijdperk van de laatste dagen nabij in de jaren vijftig en niet meer zo nabij in de harde decaden die volgden, zijn fundamentele stellingen over de eschatologische anticipatie zijn nooit veranderd. In feite zag Owen zowel vóór als na de grote scheiding van 1660 zijn eschatologie als formatief voor en verweven met zijn visie op vrijheid, eenheid van protestanten, lokaal kerkelijk beleid, eredienst, de noodzaak tot nadere reformatie in Engeland en de verbreiding van het evangelie daarbuiten.

In hoofdstuk 6 worden de resultaten van de voorgaande hoofdstukken samengevat, waarbij de ontdekkingen en interpretaties die uniek zijn voor deze studie naar voren gebracht worden. De conclusie is dat Owens visie op het koninkrijk van Christus gelaagd was, waarbij de eschatologie functioneerde als het verbindende weefsel dat veel ideeën over kerk, natie en reformatie bijeengoed. De eindconclusie is dat in dit veld Owen kan worden gekwalificeerd als iemand die hervormd was en hervormend (‘Reformed and reforming’).
Bibliography

I. Owen’s Works Cited

Compilations


Individual Works


______. A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God (1667), in Works, vol. 15.

______. A Brief Vindication of the Nonconformists from the Charge of Schism (1680), in Works, vol. 13.


______. A Discourse Concerning Evangelical Love, Church-Peace and Unity (1672), in Works, vol. 15.

______. A Discourse Concerning Liturgies and their Imposition (1662), in Works, vol. 15.

______. A Discourse Concerning the Work of the Holy Spirit (1674), in Works, vol. 3.

______. A Display of Arminianism (1642), in Works, vol. 10.
Reformed and Reforming

_____ A Guide to Church-Fellowship and Order (1692).
_____ An Answer to the Late Treatise about the Nature of Schism (1658), in Works, vol. 13.
_____ An Answer unto Dr Stillingfleet's Book (1681), in Works, vol. 15.
_____ An Answer ... about the Nature of Schism (1658), in Works, vol. 13.
_____ Animadversions on a Treatise Entitled Fiat Lux (1662) vol. 14.
_____ Brief Instruction in the Worship of God (1667), Works, vol. 15.
_____ Eschol; A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan (1648), in Works, vol. 13.

282
Bibliography

_____.

“God’s Presence with his People the Spring of their Prosperity” (1656), in Works, vol. 8.

_____.

“God’s Withdrawing his Presence, the Correction of his Church” (1675), in Works, vol. 9.

_____.

“God’s Work in Founding Zion, and His People’s Duty Thereupon” (1652), in Works, vol. 8.

_____.

“How We may Bring our Hearts to Bear Reproofs” (1674), in Works, vol. 8.

_____.


_____.


_____.


_____.


_____.


_____.

“Perilous Times” (1676), in Works, vol. 9.

_____.


_____.

Reflections on a Slanderous Libel (1670), in Works, vol. 16.

_____.

“Regarding the Present Bill Against Conventicles” (1670), in Works, vol. 13.

_____.


_____.


_____.


_____.


_____.


_____.


_____.

“Sermon 26” (1676), in Works, vol. 9.

_____.


_____.

Reformed and Reforming

_____. The Case of the Present Distresses on Nonconformists Examined (1670), in Works, vol. 13.
_____. The Chamber of Imagery in the Church of Rome Laid Open (1683), in Works, vol. 8.
_____. The Death of Death in the Death of Christ (1647), in Works, vol. 10.
_____. The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance Explained and Confirmed (1654), in Works, vol. 11.
Bibliography

______. Theologoumena Pantodapa (1661), in Works, vol. 17.
______. Two Short Catechisms (1645), in Works, vol. 1.

II. Other Primary Works

A Glimpse of Sion’s Glory (1641).
Agreement of the People (1649).
An Ordinance of the Lords and Commons Assembled in Parliament for the Calling of an Assembly of Learned, and Godly Divines (1643).
Baxter, Richard. Reliquiae Baxterianae, or, Mr. Richard Baxter’s Narrative of the most Memorable Passages of his Life and Times (1696).
ben Israel, Menasseh. Hoc Est, Spes Israelis (1650).
Brightman, Thomas. Apocalypse Apocalypseos (1611).
______. A Revelation of the Apocalypse (1615).
______. Shall They Return to Jerusalem Again? (1615).
______. The Works of that Famous, Reverend, and Learned Divine, Mr. Tho. Brightman (1644).
Burroughes, Jeremiah. Irenicum, To the Lovers of Truth and Peace: Heart-Divisions Opened in the Causes and Evils of Them (1646).
Reformed and Reforming

_______. Jerusalems Glory Breaking forth into the World being a Scripture-Discovery of the New-Testament Church (1675).


Byfield, Adonirum. The Papers and Answers of the Dissenting Brethren and the Committee of the Assembly of Divines (1648).

Byfield, Richard. Temple Defilers Defiled, Therein a True Visible Church of Christ is Described (1645).

Calamy, Edmund. The Church and the Dissenters Compar'd as to Persecution (1719).

_______. Continuation of the Account of the Ministers (et al) Who were Ejected (1727).


The Cambridge Platform (1648).

Caryl, Joseph. Humble Proposals: The Moderator: Endeavouring a full composure and quiet settlement of those many differences in doctrine and discipline, which have so long disturbed the peace and welfare of this Commonwealth; Intended (especially at this time) to beget a brotherly love and unity among ministers and people of all three Nations; the Parliament having now appointed a Committee for receiving Proposals for the Propagation of the Gospel (1652).

Cawdrey, Daniel. Independencie a Great Schism (1657).

_______. Independencie Further Proved to be a Schism (1658).

Certain Considerations and Cautions Agreed by the Ministers of London (1646).


_______. The Churches Resurrection or the Opening of the 20th Chapter of Revelation (1642).

_______. The Controversy Concerning Liberty of Conscience in Matters of Religion (1649).

_______. The Doctrine of the Church (1644).
Bibliography

_____. The Doctrine of the Church, to which is Committed the Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven (1643).
_____. An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of Revelation (1655).
_____. The Pouring Out of the Seven Vials (1642).
_____. The True Constitution of a Particular Visible Church (1642).
_____. The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared (1648).


Edwards, Thomas. The Casting Down of Toleration (1647).
_____. Gangraena, or, A Catalogue and Discovery of many of the Errors, Heresies, Blasphemies and Pernicious Practices (1646).


_____, et al. A Copy of the Remonstrance Lately Delivered to into the Assembly (1645).
_____, et al. The Petition for the Prelates Briefly Examined (1641).
_____, et al. The Reasons of the Dissenting Brethren Against the Third Proposition Concerning Presbyteriall Government (1648).

_____. An Exposition of the First Chapter of ... Ephesians (1681).
_____. An Exposition of Revelation (1639).

Hartlib, Samuel. Clavis Apocalyptica, or, a Prophetical Key by which the Great Mysteries in the Revelation of St. John and the Prophet Daniel are Opened (1651).

Hooker, Thomas. A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline (1648).

The Humble Petition and Advice (1657).

The Instrument of Government (1653).

Jessey, Henry. A Narrative of the Late Proceeds at White-Hall, Concerning the Jews (1656).

John Lillburne, Regal Tyranny Discovered (1647).

Journal of the House of Commons.
Reformed and Reforming

Journal of the House of Lords.


Mercurius Politicus 438 (1658).


Newcomen, Matthew. Irenicum, or, an Essay Towards Brotherly Peace & Union Between those of the Congregational and Presbyterian Way (1658).


Pryne, William. The Sword of the Christian Magistracy Supported (1647).

Rutherford, Samuel. The Divine Right of Church-Government and Excommunication (1646).

______. The Due Right of Presbyteries (1644).

______. A Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty (1649).

Strong, William. XXXI Select Sermons (1654).

The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (1658).

Voetius, Gisbertus. Politicae Ecclesiasticae (1663), 4 vols.

Williams, Roger. The Bloudy Tenent for Persecution for Cause of Conscience (1644).


Wood, Anthony. Athenae Oxonienses: An Exact History of All the Writers and Bishops who Have Had Their Education in the University of Oxford (London, 1813).

III. Later Editions of Primary Works

Bibliography


IV. Secondary Literature


Reformed and Reforming


Bibliography


Chi, Joseph Jung Uk. “‘Forget not the wombe that bare you, and the brest that gave you sucke’ John Cotton’s Sermons on Canticles and Revelation and His Apocalyptic Vision for England” (PhD diss., Univ. of Edinburgh, 2009).


Church, F. F. and Timothy George, eds. Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History: Essays Presented to George Huntston Williams on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday (Leiden: Brill, 1979).


292
Bibliography


______. “‘Great is the Mystery of Godliness’: The Christology of John Owen” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1990).


Bibliography


______. “Millenialism,” in *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Reformed
Reformed and Reforming


Hall, David, ed. The Practice of Confessional Subscription (Oak Ridge, Tenn.: The Covenant Foundation, 1997).


Bibliography

Hart, Trevor, ed. The Dictionary of Historical Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).


_____. “Apocalypticism in Restoration England (PhD diss, Univ. of Cambridge, 2000).


_____. Heaven Upon Earth: Joseph Mede (1586-1638) and the Legacy of Millenarianism (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006).


Bibliography


Kendall, R. T. Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997).


Lake, Peter and Michael Questier, eds. Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c.1560-1660 (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2000).

Reformed and Reforming


——. Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004).


Little, Patrick and David Smith, Parliaments and Politics During the Cromwellian Protectorate (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007).


Reformed and Reforming


_____. Catholic and Reformed (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).


Bibliography


________. “The Dissenting Brethren and the Power of the Keys, 1640-44” (PhD diss., Univ. of Cambridge, 2011).


Bibliography


______. Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology (Grand Rapids: T&T Clark, 2008).


Steinmetz, David C. Luther in Context (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986);


Bibliography


Bibliography


Reformed and Reforming


——. Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Thought, 1525-1695 (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Univ. Press, 1982).


______. The Rump Parliament (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974).


Curriculum Vitae

Ryan Kelly (b. 1974) is the Pastor for Preaching at Desert Springs Church in Albuquerque, NM, USA. In 1996, he earned the Bachelor of Science in Religion from Liberty University. In 1998, he completed a Master of Arts in Religion and a Master of Divinity (Summa Cum Laude) from Liberty Theological Seminary. Before working with Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam he was a D.Phil. student in historical theology at the University of Oxford (1998 to 1999). Since 2000 he has been a full-time pastor, serving congregations in Denver, CO and Albuquerque, NM. He is also a Council Member of the The Gospel Coalition and an instructor for the Charles Simeon Trust.