

John Owen on Assurance

by Joel R. Beeke

The Calvinistic English theologian John Owen (1616-1683) was a clear advocate of the Westminster Assembly's doctrine of assurance.¹ Owen didn't merely parrot the Westminster standards, however. Rather, using the Confession's foundation, he added his own biblically based thoughts on assurance of salvation.

Owen seldom quoted the Confession directly on assurance, however.² Furthermore, in the eighty works he wrote, Owen never produced a full-length treatise on assurance. He explained his doctrine of assurance most fully in *A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX*. A half-dozen of his other works address the issue as well. We'll examine these works in chronological order.³

*Two Short Catechisms (1645)*⁴

Owen produced a Lesser and Greater Catechism to help with home instruction.⁵ The Lesser Catechism, which contains thirty-two questions, was intended for children; the Greater

This online edition comes from Joel R. Beeke, "John Owen," in *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 165-213. Used with permission. The editors of this site wish to express their thanks to Dr. Beeke for permission to post his chapter.

¹ For biographical accounts of Owen, consult Robert Asty, "Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Owen," in *A Complete Collection of the Sermons of the Reverend and Learned John Owen, D.D.* (London: John Clark, 1721); William Orme, *Life of the Rev. John Owen, D.D.* (reprint ed., Choteau, Mont.: Gospel Mission Press, 1981); Andrew Thomson, "Life of Dr. Owen," in *The Works of John Owen, D.D.*, vol. 1 (reprint ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976); Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., "The Life and Thought of John Owen to 1660: A Study of the Significance of Calvinist Theology in English Puritanism" (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1965); *The Correspondence of John Owen*, ed. Peter Toon (London: James Clarke, 1970); Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1971); Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), pp. 1-19. For dissertations on Owen's theology, see Bass, Davis, Everson, Pyches, Stover, and Vose in the bibliography.

² *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (reprint ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 16:616. (Hereafter in chapter 7 only the volume and page number is noted.) The Goold edition was originally printed in 24 vols. by Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-53 (including 17 vols. of works plus 7 vols. containing his *Commentary on Hebrews*). In the 16-volume reprint by Banner of Truth, the Hebrews exposition is lacking, the English material from vol. 17 is transferred to vol. 16, and Owen's Latin writings in vols. 16 and 17 have been omitted. (Most of those were translated into English by Stephen Westcott and published by Soli Deo Gloria as *Biblical Theology* in 1994). I used the Goold reprint as it is more reliable than Russell's 21-vol. edition (London: for Richard Baynes, 1826). Goold's edition is also used for *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 7 vols. (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

³ With the exception of Owen's teaching on the sealing of the Spirit (see pp. 201-208 below).

⁴ Full title: *Two Short Catechisms: wherein the Principles of the Doctrine of Christ are Unfolded and Explained* 1:463-94.

Catechism, 145 questions for adults. In The Lesser Catechism Owen included this question and answer:

Q. *What is a lively faith?*

A. An assured resting of the soul upon God's promises of mercy in Jesus Christ, for pardon of sins here and glory hereafter.⁶

This connection of assurance with saving faith is even stronger in The Greater Catechism:

Q. 2. *What is a justifying faith?*

A. A gracious resting upon the free promises of God in Jesus Christ for mercy, with a firm persuasion of heart that God is a reconciled Father unto us in the Son of his love.⁷

Those statements on faith and assurance are important because, first, they reveal Owen's early conviction that assurance is an integral part of faith. Second, Owen's later modification of this position in response to the Westminster Confession makes us wonder: Did the assembly influence Owen's new direction? Or was this shift caused more by his theological maturation, personal experience, and contacts with parishioners who seemed to have faith, yet lacked full assurance? Later development in Owen's thought, commencing with *Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance* in 1654, offers some insights.

The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance (1654)⁸

Section 17.1 of the Westminster Confession defines the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints this way: "They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved." Like most Reformed theology, the Confession places the doctrine of perseverance before that of assurance. Perseverance is foundational to assurance, and is practically inseparable from it.⁹ As G. C. Berkouwer noted: "The perseverance of the saints is unbreakably connected with the assurance of faith, in which the believer faces the future with confidence—not with the idea that all dangers and threats have been removed, but rather with the assurance that they shall be conquered indeed."¹⁰ For the

⁵ "Dr Owen had at that time the charge of the parish of Fordham in Essex, and laboured diligently for the instruction and benefit of his flock, by catechising from house to house. The Catechisms were prepared in order that he might accomplish these parochial duties with greater efficiency and success" (1:[464]).

⁶ 1:468.

⁷ 1:486.

⁸ 11:1-666.

⁹ For Owen, predestination compels covenant; covenant, perseverance; perseverance, assurance (11:78).

¹⁰ *Faith and Perseverance*, p. 11.

believer, this knowledge offers the assurance that nothing will ever separate him from God's love in Christ (Romans 8:38-39).

Polemical Response to John Goodwin

No Reformed writer has matched Owen's profound thinking, thorough exposition, and rigorous application in the matter of perseverance and assurance. Owen's defense of perseverance was a response to a treatise by John Goodwin, titled *Redemption Redeemed*, in which Goodwin denied that God secures the continuance of faith in a believer.¹¹ Because Goodwin's work was rambling and repetitious and lacked logical progression, Owen's rebuttal suffered the same asymmetry. However, Owen essentially responded to the four major objections Goodwin repeatedly raised against the doctrine of perseverance. Two of those objections were theological, and two, practical. Owen clearly felt that leaving those four objections unanswered would also undermine the doctrine of personal assurance.¹²

In *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance Explained and Confirmed* (1654) Owen addressed Goodwin's objection to perseverance due to *the reality of apostasy*. Goodwin insisted that such passages as Hebrews 6:1-8 and 10:26-39, taught the possibility of the believer's defection from a state of grace. Goodwin said that was confirmed by the large numbers of churchgoers who had been zealous but were now indifferent.

Owen made no attempt to deny the existence of backsliders and apostates. Rather, he suggested that Goodwin's error, like that of all Arminians, was assuming that all professors of religion were true believers. In exhaustive detail, Owen examined scriptural passages describing those who fell away from faith and concluded that every one of those apostates had never been true believers. Owen said such apostates had experienced only a "temporary holiness" that did not change their natures.¹³ Each time Scripture mentioned a Hymenaeus or a Philetus, for example, it then made a declaration, such as, "nevertheless, the firm foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his."¹⁴ Thus hypocrites in Scripture, who were like tares among the Lord's wheat, are not convincing arguments against perseverance.

Before stating his own position on perseverance, Owen established a biblical basis for perseverance by exegeting Philippians 1:6, 1 Peter 1:5, and John 10:27-29. He then offered the following syllogism to respond to Goodwin's objection:

1. The elect cannot fall away (John 10:27-29, etc.).
2. Some professors do fall away.

¹¹ Owen's running commentary contra John Goodwin (not to be confused with Thomas Goodwin), grew into an extended book review of nearly 700 pages! Owen concluded that Goodwin borrowed the unsuccessful arguments of the Remonstrants. Although the Remonstrants initially deferred judgment on whether they held to the doctrine of perseverance, by the mid-1600s logic compelled most of them to deny it, for they increasingly realized that Calvinism could only be accepted or rejected as an organic whole. For John Goodwin, see Wallace, "Life and Thought of John Owen," pp. 242-47.

¹² 11:82ff.

¹³ 11:90.

¹⁴ 2 Timothy 2:17-19; cf. Hebrews 6:1-9; 10:26-39.

3. Hence, those professors are not elect believers.¹⁵

Next, Owen explained the doctrine of perseverance in relationship to:

(1) *The immutable nature of God as well as His promises and eternal purposes*, which extend to His elective love and covenant. The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable (Romans 11:29).¹⁶ Those gifts include perseverance, for God is bonded to His people through His promises, which form the heart of the covenant of grace.¹⁷ The covenant then becomes an unconditional promise of grace and perseverance for the believer through the mediatorial work of Christ.¹⁸ God's foreknowledge, power, promises, covenant, and immutability are all part of His sovereign, eternal love. And perseverance is part of the unbreakable chain of salvation granted to the elect.

(2) *The nature of grace itself*, which always triumphs in Scripture. Since grace perseveres, God Himself perseveres with the believer, making grace a conquering thing and Christ a conquering King.¹⁹ Christ has also granted the Spirit to Christians. This Spirit secures their perseverance, for in fulfilling the covenant of grace, the Comforter shall dwell with the elect forever (John 14:16).²⁰

(3) *The integral unity of the plan of salvation*. If the outcome of God's salvation activity in the believer is questionable, the entire enterprise of salvation must fail. If the Holy Spirit does not keep believers in grace, neither can He call, regenerate, sanctify, and assure them, for all these are indissolubly linked.²¹ Christ must also then be an impotent intercessor.²²

Goodwin's second argument against perseverance was based on Scriptures that urge Christians to maintain themselves in a state of grace. Goodwin said such texts prove that *perseverance is the sole responsibility of the believer*.

Owen's reply was that Goodwin failed to see that *obligation does not entail ability*. In other words, even though sinners are obligated to repent and believe, this doesn't prove they have the power to do so. Similarly, just because God commands his saints to use the means of grace and to persevere in faith doesn't mean they can do that in their own strength. Granted, they must strive to enter the narrow gate (Luke 13:24), must hold fast the Word preached (1 Corinthians 15:2), and must be diligent to make their calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10), but it is only through God, who will perform this in His elect. Believers work out their salvation with fear and trembling, not of doubt and uncertainty but of holy awe, for it is God Himself who is at work in them both to will and do (Philippians 2:12-13). As Owen wrote: "It is utterly denied, that

¹⁵ 11:113ff.

¹⁶ Owen similarly treated the everlasting covenant of God, the irrevocable promises and oath of God, and the irresistible grace of God (11: chps. 4-8).

¹⁷ 11:227.

¹⁸ 11:289ff.

¹⁹ 11:172-73.

²⁰ 11:308-315.

²¹ 6:145-46.

²² 11:499.

men, the best of men, have in themselves, and of themselves, arising upon the account of any considerations whatsoever, a power, ability, or strength, vigorously or at all acceptably to God, to incline their hearts to the performance of anything that is spiritually good, or in a gospel tendency to walking with God.”²³

To believe, like the Arminians, that the saints maintain their own faith is to minimize the doctrine of total depravity, for even after regeneration the believer does not have perfect knowledge of the good, much less the desire or ability to carry it out.²⁴ The believer works at salvation, but only through God’s eternal power, which works mightily in him (Colossians 1:29). In short, Owen taught that assurance is to perseverance what perseverance is to divine election and faithfulness. Election therefore must be a motive for perseverance, holiness, and assurance. He wrote:

[Election] hath the same tendency and effect in the assurance we have from thence, that notwithstanding all the oppositions we meet withal, we shall not utterly and finally miscarry. God’s “election” will at last “obtain,” Rom. xi. 7; and “his foundation standeth sure,” 2 Tim. ii. 19. His purpose, which is “according unto election,” is unchangeable; and, therefore, the final perseverance and salvation of those concerned in it are everlastingly secured. . . . And there is no greater encouragement to grow and persist in holiness than what is administered by this assurance of a blessed end and issue of it.²⁵

Goodwin offered two more objections to perseverance. The first was *the danger of antinomianism*. He said widespread teaching of the doctrine of perseverance would give rise to lawlessness and disregard for the moral code of Scripture. The second objection was that perseverance minimizes *the importance of God’s exhortations and commands*. Goodwin wrote, “If it is absolutely certain that God will preserve his people from apostasy, and he intends so to do, why then does he appeal to them to strive and to use the means of grace? This doctrine empties God’s every command of all meaning.”²⁶

The essence of Owen’s reply to Goodwin concerning antinomianism was simple: God preserves His saints in holiness. Christ saves His people *from*, not *in*, their sins. Justification is inseparable from sanctification; new birth necessarily results in new life. Far from promoting loose living, perseverance promises the assurance of eternal salvation by the only path that will get the believer to heaven: the King’s highway of holiness.²⁷ The doctrine of perseverance stimulates love, which can only yield obedience, for “it is the Spirit of Christ in the gospel that cuts [sin’s] throat and destroys it,” Owen wrote.²⁸ Though the Christian may fall into occasional

²³ 6:165.

²⁴ Owen based this on Romans 7:17-21 and John 15:5 (6:153-56).

²⁵ 3:601-602. Cf. *Hebrews* 4:155-57.

²⁶ 11:243.

²⁷ 11:254ff.

²⁸ 11:393.

sin, Christ effectually prays that his faith may not fail.²⁹ Consequently, perseverance guarantees the believer's continued sanctification and eventual glorification.³⁰

Owen responded to Goodwin's concern that perseverance minimizes God's exhortations by stating that it is the moral duty of everyone to obey God's commands, and when believers do so, that signifies God's work within them. Hence, the sovereign activity of God neither negates the means of grace nor their efficacy. God has created the universe to work through the medium of cause and effect. Consequently, no one has an excuse to disobey God's moral imperatives. As Owen wrote: "As well might we argue that it is unnecessary for us to breathe because God gives us breath, or that Hezekiah need no longer to eat and drink because God had promised he should live another fifteen years. . . . Grace does not annul our responsibility but fits us to discharge it; it relieves from no duties, but equips for the performance of them."³¹

Setting the Stage for Elaboration on Assurance

In his defense of perseverance, Owen offered three particulars on assurance, which he later developed more fully:

First, unlike what he stated in his early catechisms, Owen now seemed to allow some distinction between faith and assurance by describing several *degrees* of, and *foundations* in, assurance. With degrees of assurance, he distinguished the weakest witness, "one of the lowest voices of all [the believer's] store" from stronger forms of witness.³² In addition, he said that the foundation of assurance must not be limited to "the testimony of [the believer's] own conscience concerning his own regular walking in ways of righteousness."³³ Rather, it was evident, "and the saints acknowledge it," that Scripture built assurance on other foundations.³⁴ The reflex act of faith, which forms an essential role in the practical syllogism, is therefore not an integral part of every kind of assurance. Owen's space here between faith and assurance was not as great as it would later become. He wrote: "Yea, in the very graces themselves of faith and uprightness of heart, there is such a seal and stamp, impressing the image of God upon the soul, as, without any reflex act or actual contemplation of those graces themselves, have an influence into the establishment of the souls of men in whom they are unto a quiet, comfortable, assured repose of themselves upon the love and faithfulness of God."³⁵

Second, Owen stated for the first time his conviction that doubts and fears are possible in the believer without a substantial loss of assurance. He wrote: "Neither is the spiritual confidence of the saints shaken, much less cast to the ground, by their conflicting with fears, scruples, and doubtful apprehensions, seeing in all these conflicts they have the pledge of the faithfulness of

²⁹ 11:495.

³⁰ Cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:3-5, 2:13; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Ephesians 5:3-6.

³¹ 11:280.

³² 11:85.

³³ 11:86.

³⁴ 11:84.

³⁵ 11:83.

God that they shall be more than conquerors. Though they are exercised by them, they are not dejected with them, nor deprived of that comforting assurance and joy which they have in believing.”³⁶

Owen stated God Himself is glorified by such “trials and exercises of their graces whereunto he calls them.” He may even use these fears to establish His saints. “It is no singular thing for the saints of God to be exercised with a thousand fears and jealousies, and through them to grow to great establishment,” he wrote.³⁷

Finally, Owen acknowledged that some degree of assurance was normal in the believer. In response to Goodwin’s comment, “There is not one true believer of a hundred, yea, of many thousands, who hath any such assurance of his faith as is built upon solid and pregnant foundations,” Owen stated:

I no way doubt but many thousands of believers, whose apprehensions of the nature, properties, and conditions of things, as they are in themselves, are low, weak, and confused, yet, having received the Spirit of adoption, bearing witness with their spirits that they are the children of God, and having the testimony in themselves, have been taken up into as high a degree of comforting and cheering assurance, and that upon the most infallible foundation imaginable (for “the Spirit beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth,” 1 John v.6), as ever the most seraphically illuminated person in the world attained unto.³⁸

Owen later modified this remarkable statement, though he maintained its principle throughout his career.

Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (1657)

In addition to providing a foundation for assurance of salvation through the doctrine of divine preservation rooted in eternal election, Owen offered a subjective approach to assurance by describing the communion between the Christian and the three Persons of the Trinity. In *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*, Owen said that the believer communes with God, not in general, but with God’s three Persons. The believer communes with each Person distinctly,³⁹ which, in turn, promotes assurance.

Owen found scriptural support for “distinct communion” in such texts as John 14:23; 1 Corinthians 1:9, 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 3:14; 1 John 1:3, 5:7; and Revelation 3:20. Sinclair Ferguson writes of Owen’s use of such passages: “Owen adds the axiom that all the activity of faith has reference to one distinct person of the Trinity, as do all receptions of grace. This is what

³⁶ 11:83-84.

³⁷ 11:85.

³⁸ 11:83.

³⁹ 2:9ff.

he means by fellowship or communion. Thus the Father communicates by original authority, the Son from a purchased treasury and the Spirit in immediate efficacy. This is the classical doctrine of *Appropriations*.⁴⁰

Before examining this treatise, here are some comments about the context in which it was written. First, the theme of communion with God was critically important to Owen's generation of Puritan divines. Their preoccupation with the subject of communion between God and His elect was not an attempt to humanize God or to deify man, however.⁴¹ Rather, Owen and his colleagues wanted to explain, from within a Trinitarian framework, how God deals with needy sinners. The divines were not so much concerned with religious experience as an end in itself (which often is today's concern in a kind of *negative pietism*), as they were with religious experience as a revelation of God and His astonishing grace (or *positive pietism*). J. I. Packer rightly stated: "In modern spiritual autobiography [for example], the hero and chief actor is usually the writer himself; he is the centre of interest, and God comes in only as a part of his story. His theme is in effect 'I—and God.' But in Puritan autobiography, God is at the centre throughout. He, not the writer, is the focus of interest; the subject of the book is in effect 'God — and me.'"⁴²

Second, Owen's theme of having communion with distinct divine Persons was a familiar one in Puritan literature.⁴³ In *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, for example, Thomas Goodwin wrote of an intimate connection between assurance of faith and distinct communion:

In assurance. . . a man's communion and converse is . . . sometimes with the Father, then with the Son, and then with the Holy Ghost; sometimes his heart is drawn out to consider the Father's love in choosing, and then the love of Christ in redeeming, and so again the love of the Holy Ghost, that searcheth the deep things of God, and revealeth them to us, and taketh all the pains with us; and so a man goes from one witness to another distinctly. . . . We should never be satisfied till all three persons lie level in us, and all make their abode with us, and we sit as it were in the midst of them, while they all manifest their love unto us.⁴⁴

Third, Owen's *Communion with God* was unique in how it worked the idea of communion with distinct Persons of the Trinity into a systematic treatise. That is what prompted

⁴⁰ *John Owen on the Christian Life*, pp. 75-76.

⁴¹ E.g., see Dale Arden Stover, "The Pneumatology of John Owen: A Study of the Role of the Holy Spirit in Relation to the Shape of a Theology" (Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University, 1967), pp. 304-305.

⁴² "The Puritan Idea of Communion with God," in *Press Toward the Mark* (London: n.p., 1962), p. 7.

⁴³ E.g., consult any Puritan commentary on the Song of Solomon (Richard Sibbes, John Dove, Nathaniel Homes, James Durham, and John Collinges). Collinges wrote 909 pages on chapter 1 and 530 on chapter 2 (*The Intercourses of Divine Love betwixt Christ and the Church* [London: A. Maxwell for Tho. Parkhurst, 1676]) on the communion of Christ and His church as represented by the communion of the Bridegroom and his bride.

⁴⁴ *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* 8:379.

Daniel Burgess to write, “This treatise . . . is the only one extant upon its great and necessary subject.”⁴⁵

Fourth, *Communion with God* was favorably received from the time of its 1657 printing until its 1674 reprinting, after which it drew a rather inept attack from William Sherlock. Owen responded with *A Vindication*⁴⁶ but seemed genuinely surprised that this work should be subject to criticism, since it was “wholly practical, designed for popular edification, without a direct engagement into things controversial.” He added, “I do know that multitudes of persons fearing God, and desiring to walk before him in sincerity, are ready, if occasion require to give testimony unto the benefit which they received thereby.”⁴⁷

Communion with God was popular among Dutch Calvinists as well. It was translated into Dutch by J. H. Hofman and published in 1717.⁴⁸ For many of English and Dutch descent, the work merited Daniel Burgess’s commendation: “The very highest of angel’s food is here set before thee.”⁴⁹ No doubt this book was also angelic food for Owen, who was at the time of its writing, extremely busy serving as Vice-Chancellor at Oxford University.⁵⁰

Andrew Thomson’s criticism that Owen carried the idea of distinct communion between the believer and each of the Persons of the Godhead beyond Scripture,⁵¹ did not do justice to Owen’s careful, biblical scholarship. Reginald Kirby’s assessment was more accurate: “Owen is but setting forth what is the experience of those who do enter into communion with God, and shows that the doctrine of the Trinity has its basis in human experience as well as Divine revelation.”⁵²

Owen’s concept of communion with “distinct Persons” was innocent of Dale Stover’s charge that “when God is known in this philosophical way, then epistemology is inevitably detached from soteriology.”⁵³ As we shall see, Owen’s *Communion with God* actually merged epistemology and soteriology spiritually and biblically. His treatise was more like a sermon than a philosophy lecture.

For Owen, communion between a believer and any Person of the Trinity represented a living relationship of mutual exchange. This mutual communication must be in and through

⁴⁵ 2:[4].

⁴⁶ 2:275-365.

⁴⁷ 2:277.

⁴⁸ Cf. J. van der Haar, *Van Abbadie tot Young: Een Bibliografie van Engelse, veelal Puritaanse, in het Nederlands vertaalde Werken* (Veenendaal: Uitgeverij Kool, 1980), p. 89.

⁴⁹ 2:[4].

⁵⁰ Cf. A. Thomson’s synopsis, 1:1xxii-1xxiii, and Reginald Kirby, *The Threefold Bond* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, n.d.), p. 25.

⁵¹ 1:1xxii.

⁵² *Threefold Bond*, p. 25.

⁵³ “The Pneumatology of John Owen,” p. 304.

Christ, for without Christ no communion between God and man can exist.⁵⁴ From the outset Owen established a Christological focus for his Trinitarian framework. He said fellowship, or communion with God, “consisteth in his *communication of himself unto us, with our return unto him* of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that *union* which in Jesus Christ we have with him.”⁵⁵ Owen did not stress Christ at the expense of the Father and the Spirit, however, for that would have been false Christomonism. For Owen, theocentricity and Christocentricity walk together as friends, not as rivals. As F.R. Entwistle noted: “It is sometimes suggested that modern, Christological theology is more honouring to Christ than the older Trinitarianism, and in such a suggestion lies its appeal to the Christian. But this is not so. Owen’s full Trinitarianism is not less honouring to Christ: to give glory to the Father and the Spirit does not detract from the glory of the Son.”⁵⁶

Within that framework, Owen taught distinct roles or economies for the Father, Son, and Spirit. He said the first Person, the Father, is *initiator*, who chooses whom and how He will save. The second Person is the Son and Word of God, who images the Father and does His will as Mediator to *redeem* sinners. The third Person proceeds from the first two as their *executive*, conveying to God’s elect their sure salvation.

Since all three Persons are active in salvation, bestowing distinct gifts according to their roles, the believer should distinctly acknowledge each Person. Owen explained the biblical, experiential basis for that through two principles: First, “there is no grace whereby our souls go forth unto God, no act of divine worship yielded to Him, no duty or obedience performed, but they are distinctly directed unto Father, Son and Spirit”; and second, “by what act soever we hold communion with any Person there is an influence from every Person to the putting forth of that act.”⁵⁷

Communion with the Father: Love

Owen described the distinctive relationship saints have with the Father as preeminently *a communion of love*. Though careful not to present Christ’s love as “winning over” a reluctant Father’s love, Owen insisted that divine love has its deepest roots in the bosom of the Father. The Father delights to bestow divine love on the elect (Philippians 1:28), Owen said. And Scripture’s references to the love of God most frequently mean the love of the Father. Christ’s words “The Father himself loveth you” (John 16:27) assure the believer of God the Father’s role in his salvation.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ For Owen, all such “communion is entered only through the ‘door’ of ‘grace and pardoning mercy,’ purchased for the elect by the merit of Christ” (Wallace, “Life and Thought of John Owen,” p. 265).

⁵⁵ 2:8. Consequently, for Owen “both the union with Christ which gives the Christian his status before God, and the communion with God which is the fruit of that status, are thus subsumed under the notion of communion, and this is the sense in which Owen generally employs the expression” (Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, p. 75).

⁵⁶ “Some Aspects of John Owen’s Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ,” *Faith and a Good Conscience* (papers read at Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, 1962), p. 51.

⁵⁷ 2:15, 18.

⁵⁸ 2:20.

The way to exercise communion with the Father is to receive His love by faith, and to *return* this love to Him by faith.⁵⁹ This twofold act of faith always takes place through the Son. As Owen wrote: “Jesus Christ in respect of the love of the Father, is but the beam, the stream, wherein though actually all our light, our refreshment lies, yet by him we are led to the fountain, the sun of eternal love itself [i.e., the Father]. The soul being thus by faith through Christ . . . brought unto the bosom of God, into a comfortable persuasion, and spiritual perception and sense of his love, there reposes and rests itself.”⁶⁰

In resting in the bosom of the Father through Christ, the believer returns the Father’s love in his heart to the heart of the Father, from whom it originated. This returned love consists of rest, delight, reverence, and obedience.

When the Christian encounters obstacles in loving God, he must contemplate the nature of the Father’s love, Owen said. First, the believer must remember not to invert God’s order of love, thinking that the believer’s love comes first. Second, he should meditate on the eternal quality and unchangeableness of the Father’s love. Third, he should remember that the cross of Christ is the sign and seal of God’s love, assuring him that the Father’s *antecedent* love wins his *consequent* love through the Mediator.⁶¹ He who returns to the Father with such meditations will find assurance of the Father’s love. As Owen wrote: “Never any one from the foundation of the world, who believed such love in the Father, and made returns of love to him again, was deceived. . . . If thou believest and receivest the Father as love, he will infallibly be so to thee.”⁶²

Communion with the Son: Grace

The special gift of the second Person of the Trinity is *communion of grace*. According to Owen, Christ is the Mediator of the new covenant, and the new covenant is of grace. Grace is in Him and everywhere ascribed to Him (John 1:14). The believer receives grace by receiving Christ. As John 1:16 says, “Of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace.” Christ’s very Person is the essence of grace.⁶³ What’s more, Christ is pleased to manifest His gracious Person to sinners out of the free favor of His merits despite their demerits.

Christ’s grace is the same as mediatorial, “purchased” grace,⁶⁴ for the distinct communion believers have with Him involves Christ *as Mediator*. As Mediator, Christ lays His hand on God (Zechariah 13:7) and on man (Hebrews 2:14-16), thereby becoming the “daysman” or “umpire” for His elect. Christ is eminently suited to accomplish this, for He has the true likeness of both natures in one Person (Acts 3:21).

⁵⁹ 2:26-40.

⁶⁰ 2:22-23.

⁶¹ 2:29.

⁶² 2:36-37.

⁶³ 2:47; 3:414.

⁶⁴ For Owen’s usage of and safeguards on the expression “purchased grace,” see Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, pp. 86-88.

Conjugal Relationship

In explaining how the Christian comes to know this fellowship of Christ's mediatorial grace, Owen emphasized the *conjugal relationship* between Christ and His people in terms of Song of Solomon 2:1-7 and chapter 5.⁶⁵ Christ woos and wins His bride, drawing His elect "to receive, embrace and submit unto the Lord Jesus as their husband, Lord, and Saviour,—to abide with him, subject their souls unto him, and to be ruled by him for ever,"⁶⁶ Owen said. The inevitable result of receiving Christ is communion with Him. Owen explained:

When the soul consents to take Christ on his own terms, to save him in his own way, and says, "Lord, I would have had thee and salvation in my way, that it might have been partly of mine endeavours, and as it were by the works of the law; I am now willing to receive thee and to be saved in thy way,—merely by grace: and though I would have walked according to my own mind, yet now I wholly give up myself to be ruled by thy Spirit; for in thee have I righteousness and strength, in thee am I justified and do glory;"— then doth it carry on communion with Christ as to the grace of his person. This it is to receive the Lord Jesus in his comeliness and eminency.⁶⁷

In short, the same faith that responds to the Father, responds to Christ. That response is brought to fruition by faith acting in *marital chastity* towards Christ. Such chastity trusts in Christ alone for acceptance with God. It cherishes the Spirit of Christ and relishes pure worship of Christ.

Mutual resignation is intrinsic to that relationship. "Christ having given himself to the soul, loves the soul, and the soul having given itself to Christ loveth Him also," Owen wrote.⁶⁸ A sweet mystical knowledge and communion flows into this reciprocal relationship, which Christ initiates by giving Himself to the soul. All of Christ's excellencies, preciousness, and everything that grace entails are poured into the believer when Christ becomes Savior, Head, Husband, and Indweller.

In return, the believer receives grace to *receive* Christ, not only in initial trust, but also in intimate communion, in a continued loving of Him with his will and all his affections. In communing with Christ, the believer's will becomes subordinate to Christ's, and his love uplifted by Christ's. And increasingly, the believer's experiences with Christ make him more conscious of the love of the Father.

This communion results in deliberate, daily submission to Christ as gracious Lord. In resigning himself to Christ, the believer brings each day's sins to Christ for forgiveness, each day's mercies to Christ for praise, each day's needs to Christ for the sanctifying and purifying

⁶⁵ Cf. note 43 above. This is not to say that Owen developed his Christology or its experimental aspects from the Song of Solomon. Rather, he illustrated the believer's experience of communion with Christ through its poetry. Ferguson notes, "He does not subjectivize Christ to the point of mysticism, but rather tries to describe the subjective experience of the objective Christ to whom the rest of Scripture bears witness" (*John Owen on the Christian Life*, pp. 78ff.).

⁶⁶ 2:58.

⁶⁷ 2:58-59.

⁶⁸ 2:56ff.

supply of His Spirit.⁶⁹ It is this daily returning that brings peace and fellowship and such intimacy that Owen could write: “There is not anything in the heart of Christ wherein those friends of his are concerned that he doth not reveal to them.”⁷⁰

Through fellowship with Christ the believer comes to know both Christ and himself. Christ becomes the mirror of the believer’s soul, the unveiler of the secret intuitions of the believer’s heart. In revealing Himself, Christ also reveals the believer’s self. In making his mind known to Christ in confession and praise, the child of God may enjoy constantly renewed forgiveness and friendship. As Owen wrote: “This does he who hath communion with Christ: he watcheth daily and diligently over his own heart that nothing creep into its affections to give it any peace or establishment before God, but Christ only.”⁷¹

The result of this mutual giving—Christ to the believer, and the believer in gratitude to Christ—is deep, constant assurance of faith.

Adoption

The most direct result of communion with Christ that enhances assurance is *adoption*.⁷² Adoption is what makes sanctification possible and becomes the crowning work of grace in the final analysis. Thus, adoption is both the means by which we enter the family of God and the result of it. As Owen wrote: “Adoption is the authoritative translation of a believer, by Jesus Christ, from the family of the world and Satan into the family of God, with his investiture in all the privileges and advantages of that family.”⁷³

In the matter of adoption, Owen stressed that communion with Christ is central. Our standing in God is made possible by our adoption through Christ. Through fellowship with Him, we share the benefits of God’s family. In the process of adoption and the assurance that follows, Christ is essential as the Person who carries out the Father’s will.

Adoption involved five things for Owen, which Sinclair Ferguson summarized as follows: “(1) that the person first belongs to another family; (2) that there is a family to which he has no right to belong; (3) that there is an authoritative legal translation from one family to another; (4) that the adopted person is freed from all the legal obligations of the family from which he came; (5) and that by virtue of his translation he is invested with all the rights, privileges, and advantages of the new family.”⁷⁴

Through Christ the Christian experiences the annulment of sin’s penalty, victory over sin, and new family privileges such as liberty, a title to all adoptive blessings, boldness with God, and correction through fatherly dealings.⁷⁵ The child of God gains acquaintance with God as

⁶⁹ 2:197-207.

⁷⁰ 2:59.

⁷¹ 2:146.

⁷² Other benefits believers gain from communing with Christ include: approving of the divine way of salvation, maintaining a sense of continuing sinfulness, and yielding to holiness as a response to the holiness of Christ (2:187-207).

⁷³ 2:207; cf. 2:173.

⁷⁴ *John Owen on the Christian Life*, pp. 90-91; cf. 2:207-208.

⁷⁵ 2:211ff.

Father⁷⁶ and Christ as Elder Brother, which is accompanied by a deepening conviction that Christ belongs to him and he to Christ.⁷⁷

The bond between communion with Christ and assurance of salvation is inseparable,⁷⁸ though Owen didn't make much of that link here. Thomas Goodwin stressed assurance that flows out of communion with Christ, but Owen preferred to focus on the believer's duty to grow in communion with Christ and His grace.⁷⁹

Owen would have agreed with Goodwin's view of certain steps in grace being more advanced than others and that advancement in assurance roughly parallels advancement in grace, but Owen did not dwell on the steps in grace. Rather, he branched out of his experimental theology often covering nearly the entire order of salvation as he did under his consideration of adoption. Ultimately Owen wanted to stress that "the Spirit of Christ testifies to the heart and conscience of a believer that he is freed from all engagement unto the family of Satan, and is become the son of God, which enables him to cry, 'Abba, Father.'" He thus wrote of adoption applied to the conscience, but also in a broader sense as being brought by Christ from Satan's family into the family of God, with all the privileges of that family.⁸⁰ Within that framework, Owen stressed that every mark of grace is possessed in principle by each Christian from regeneration onward, despite the fact that its consciousness may not be yet realized. For example, in *A Discourse of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer*, he wrote: "But believers have it [i.e., assurance or boldness] always in the root and principle, even all that have received the Spirit of adoption, and are ordinarily assisted in the use of it."⁸¹

Communion with the Spirit: Comfort

Finally, the third Person of the Trinity communes with the believer as *Comforter*. Though he acknowledged that the Spirit as Paraclete acts as both Advocate and Comforter, Owen chose to stress the role of Comforter.⁸² Later, in *A Discourse on the Holy Spirit as Comforter*, Owen wrote about the Spirit's role of Advocate, unction, and seal in assurance. We'll examine that later.⁸³

At this point, Owen stressed how the Spirit as Consoler communes with the believer in these ways: (1) the Spirit helps the believer remember the words of Christ and teaches him what

⁷⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, "Doctrine of the Christian Life in the Teaching of Dr John Owen [1616-83]," [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 1979], pp. 175-76.

⁷⁷ 2:187.

⁷⁸ 2:218.

⁷⁹ Cf. J. I. Packer, "Puritan Idea of Communion with God," p. 12.

⁸⁰ 2:207ff. *Contra* Stover, the Spirit of Christ was emphasized by Owen (2:207, 210). Owen also used the terminology, Spirit of the Father (2:241), particularly with regard to adoption. Cf. 4:265-69; 292-94.

⁸¹ 4:294.

⁸² 2:225.

⁸³ See pp. 200-208 below. For Holy Spirit as advocate, see 4:361-68; as unction, 4:389ff.; as seal, 4:399-406.

they mean; (2) the Spirit glorifies Christ; (3) He spreads the love of God in the Christian's heart; (4) He convinces the believer that he is a child of God; (5) He seals faith in the Christian, (6) assures him of that as his earnest, (7) anoints him, (8) adopts him, and (9) grants him the Spirit of supplication.⁸⁴

Five of those comforting forms of communion directly contribute to personal assurance, and two of those here represent Owen's most definitive treatment. The two are the Spirit's witness to the believer's conscience that he is a justified child of God, and the Spirit sealing that promise as an earnest to the Christian.⁸⁵

Witnessing in the Court of Conscience

Owen said the witness of the Spirit, adoption into the divine family, and personal justification in the court of one's own conscience were some of the strongest promoters of assurance. Concerning the Spirit's witness in the believer's court of conscience, Owen wrote:

The soul, by the power of its own conscience, is brought before the law of God. There a man puts in his plea,—that he is a child of God, that he belongs to God's family; and for this end produceth all his evidences, every thing whereby faith gives him an interest in God. Satan, in the meantime, opposeth with all his might; sin and law assist him; many flaws are found in his evidences; the truth of them all is questioned; and the soul hangs in suspense as to the issue. In the midst of the plea and contest the Comforter comes, and, by a word of promise or otherwise, overpowers the heart with a comfortable persuasion (and bears down all objections) that his plea is good, and that he is a child of God. . . . When our spirits are pleading their right and title, he comes in and bears witness on our side; at the same time enabling us to put forth acts of filial obedience, kind and child-like; which is called "crying, Abba, Father," Gal. iv. 6.

Owen explained that the believer's court case may last long before it is settled:

Sometimes the dispute hangs long,—the cause is pleading many years. The law seems sometimes to prevail, sin and Satan to rejoice; and the poor soul is filled with dread about its inheritance. Perhaps its own witness, from its faith, sanctification, former experience, keeps up the plea with some life and comfort; but the work is not done, the conquest is not fully obtained, until the Spirit, who worketh freely and effectually, when and how he will, comes in with his testimony also; clothing his power with a word of promise, he makes all parties concerned to attend unto him, and puts an end to the controversy. . . . When the Holy Ghost by one word stills the tumults and storms that are raised in the soul, giving it an immediate claim and security, it knows his divine power, and rejoices in his presence.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ 2:236-49.

⁸⁵ For the other three, see pp. 180-81 above for adoption and pp. 201-208 below for sealing and anointing.

⁸⁶ 2:241-42.

Several comments are in order here:

First, Owen's concept of a "courtroom-conscience," complete with judge, plaintiff, prosecuting witnesses, and defense attorney, is not a unique illustration used by Reformed theologians to describe how justification is experienced.⁸⁷ Though English Puritan divines made only passing references to this, Dutch theologians more frequently explained justification in the court of conscience as an advanced step of grace that illustrated reaching an established state of assurance.⁸⁸

Nevertheless, for Owen (as well as anyone else who used that example), assurance that came from justification in the court of conscience represented a high certainty of divine acceptance applied to the believer's conscience. Owen later made a distinction in *An Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX* between the *state of adherence* (i.e., a saving "persuasion or discovery of forgiveness in God, where there is no assurance of any particular interest therein . . . that our own sins in particular are pardoned"),⁸⁹ and the *state of assurance* (i.e., a saving application that this discovery of God's forgiveness belongs to one's self through its being "testified unto the conscience in a word of promise mixed by faith").⁹⁰ That distinction won whole-hearted acceptance among the Dutch divines. Owen's elaboration of how deeply one may be encouraged through personal discovery of forgiveness while remaining outside of the personal application of that forgiveness likewise received their approval.⁹¹ But some Dutch theologians' explanation of conversion went beyond Owen to a more detailed analysis of the steps in grace. Consequently, it is understandable that for Owen and others the higher step of grace in courtroom justification was more accessible to the average believer than for some Dutch divines, who viewed it as a scarce, sovereign gift that must nevertheless be sought by the conscientious believer.

Second, Owen offered several thoughts on justification in the court of conscience that differed in emphasis from the Dutch divines:

(1) Whereas justification in the court of conscience is sometimes regarded as an instantaneous divine act and an unforgettable, once-for-all experience by Dutch theologians, Owen viewed it as a longer process that can be held in the balance for years before the plaintiff's case is settled. He wrote, "Hence sometimes the dispute hangs long,—the cause is pleading many years."⁹² Owen later reinforced that in his remarks on Hebrews 2:2-4: "The promise of the gospel, conveyed unto the soul by the Holy Spirit, and entertained by faith, completes the justification of a believer in his own conscience, and gives him *assured peace* with God."⁹³

⁸⁷ See p. 146 above.

⁸⁸ See chapter 8 on Alexander Comrie's view of assurance. Cf. Joel R. Beeke, *Jehovah Shepherding His Sheep* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 90-98.

⁸⁹ 6:415, 426.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ 6:416-27.

⁹² 2:241. Cf. Alexander Comrie, *The ABC of Faith*, trans. J. M. Banfield (Ossett, W. Yorks: Zoar, 1978), p. 74. See chapter 8 below.

⁹³ *Hebrews* 3:300.

(2) Owen regarded the role of the plaintiff as self-defense based on God's saving work, whereas most Dutch theologians said the plaintiff comes before God the Judge as a *self-condemned* sinner. True, Owen's plaintiff becomes self-condemning after the testimonies of witnesses, yet there is a tendency here that leads to another intriguing difference.

(3) For Owen, the plaintiff is justified in his conscience by *the Holy Spirit's* affirming God's saving work within him by applying one or more scriptural promises. For some Dutch Second Reformation divines, the plaintiff's attorney is not the Holy Spirit at all, but Jesus Christ as Mediator who demands the justification of the plaintiff by His Father as Judge on the basis of Christ's payment of the penalty of sin. *The Father* thus acquits the sinner on the basis of His Son's mediation and advocacy. The Spirit then seals that pronouncement in the sinner's heart.

Owen stressed the role of the Spirit, whereas the Dutch divines stressed the role of God the Father as Judge. In addition, the Dutch distinguished between justification and adoption, saying justification is a *judicial* act of the Father as Judge, which results in reconciliation, whereas adoption is a *paternal* act of the Father as Father, which results in full restoration.⁹⁴ To be fair, Owen further developed his position on the Father's role. Eleven years later, in *An Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX*, Owen stated that acquittal ultimately flows from the first Person. He wrote, "The true nature of gospel forgiveness . . . flows from the gracious heart of the Father through the blood of the Son."⁹⁵

The Believer's "Earnest"

Owen offered a concise description of how the Holy Spirit serves as earnest, or pledge, to the believer. He noted that in 2 Corinthians 1:22 and 5:5 believers are said to have the earnest of the Spirit, whereas in Ephesians 1:13-14 the Spirit Himself is said to be the believer's earnest.⁹⁶ Owen wrote that the Spirit is the believer's earnest as the Spirit of *promise*, while distinguishing between the Spirit's role as earnest "on the part of God" and "on the part of believers."⁹⁷

Describing the earnest as "part of that which is to come and but a part of it,"⁹⁸ Owen argued that "the Spirit given us for the fitting of us for enjoyment of God in some measure, whilst we are here, is the earnest of the whole" inheritance to come.⁹⁹ Thus, the Lord looks upon His elect and views their inheritance as integral with His grace. The Spirit is also an earnest within the Christian, teaching him about the inheritance that shall be his. All of this enhances assurance. As Owen wrote, "So is he in all respects completely an earnest,—given of God, received by us, as the beginning of our inheritance, and the assurance of it."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Cf. Beeke, *Jehovah Shepherding His Sheep*, p. 95.

⁹⁵ 6:420; cf. 6:510, 538, 540.

⁹⁶ 2:243-44.

⁹⁷ 2:244-45.

⁹⁸ 2:244; cf. 4:407.

⁹⁹ 2:245.

¹⁰⁰ 2:246.

Thus, Owen saw the earnest of the Spirit not as an act, but as an office of the Spirit Himself,¹⁰¹ particularly as a pledge of the believer's inheritance that was lost by the first Adam and regained by the last Adam. Through union with Christ, the Spirit becomes an earnest, thereby stabilizing the Christian, for his hope shall not be disappointed.¹⁰² As earnest, the Spirit assures the believer that though his experience of salvation is yet imperfect and will be until Judgment Day¹⁰³—perfection will surely come. The Spirit is Christ's own earnest (ἀρραβὼν) of this perfect inheritance.

In *A Discourse on the Holy Spirit as a Comforter* (written, according to Owen, to augment *Communion with God and Perseverance of the Saints*¹⁰⁴), Owen reaffirmed his early convictions on how the Spirit's earnest leads to assurance. He wrote: "The meaning therefore . . . is that God gives unto us his Holy Spirit to dwell in us, and to abide with us, as an earnest of our future inheritance . . . wherein God intends our assurance only, and not his own."¹⁰⁵

Owen also clarified his earlier suggestion about the role of the Father in giving the Spirit to show the believer that he is a co-heir with Christ. He wrote that the Spirit represents "the first-fruits of our spiritual and eternal redemption [because] He is the Spirit of adoption and the Spirit of the Son, [so that] in the giving of his Spirit unto us, God the Father making of us co-heirs with Christ, we have the greatest and most assured earnest and pledge of our future inheritance."¹⁰⁶

In sum, Owen showed how the earnest, sealing, and anointing of the Spirit fortify the Christian's assurance of eternal salvation:

No one way, or thing, or similitude, can express or represent the greatness of this privilege, for in this one privilege of receiving the Spirit are all others inwrapped. It is *anointing*, it is *sealing*, it is an *earnest* and *first-fruit*,—every thing whereby the love of God and the blessed security of our condition may be expressed or intimated unto us; for what greater pledge can we have of the love and favour of God, what greater dignities can we be made partakers of, what greater assurance of a future blessed condition, than that God hath given us of his Holy Spirit?¹⁰⁷

Owen also taught that, in response to the work of the Spirit, the believer must avoid grieving the Spirit by negligence or sin (Ephesians 4:30), quenching Him by opposing or

¹⁰¹ 4:407; cf. 4:384 and 11:329ff. Also, Thomas Goodwin, *Works* 6:63-67, and John Preston, *Sinnes Overthrow*, 3rd ed., (London: F. Kingston for A. Crooke, 1635), p. 39, both of whom maintain the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit in opposition to R. Hollingworth, *The Holy Ghost on the Bench, other spirits at the bar; or the judgment of the Holy Spirit of God upon the spirits of the times* (London: J. M. for Luke Fawn, 1656), pp. 8, 10.

¹⁰² 2:253.

¹⁰³ 4:411.

¹⁰⁴ 4:352.

¹⁰⁵ 4:408.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. 4:407-412.

¹⁰⁷ 4:412.

hindering His work (1 Thessalonians 5:19), and resisting Him by refusing His word (Acts 7:51). The Spirit deserves constant thanks and continual petitioning for ongoing peace, Owen said.¹⁰⁸

Packer aptly summarized Owen's emphasis by writing: "This, then, according to Owen, should be the pattern of our regular communion with the three Persons of the Godhead, in meditation, prayer, and a duly ordered life. We should dwell on the special mercy and ministry of each Person towards us, and make our proper response of love and communion distinctly to each. Thus we are to maintain a full-orbed communion with God."¹⁰⁹

The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (1658)

The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, which was written in 1658 to consolidate conservative independents, was strongly influenced by Owen.¹¹⁰ In addition to writing the Declaration's lengthy introduction, Owen made his theological mark throughout the Declaration proper, particularly in what it incorporated and changed from the Westminster Confession of Faith. Three of the changes it made were in reference to section 18.2 of the Confession. The Declaration said:

This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope, but an infallible assurance of faith, founded *on the blood and righteousness of Christ, revealed in the Gospel, and also upon the inward evidence of those graces unto which promises are made, and on the immediate witness of the Spirit, testifying our Adoption, and as a fruit thereof, leaving the heart more humble and holy.*¹¹¹

Though these changes did not depart from the doctrine of the Confession, they did add Owen's particular emphases. For example, the first change linked the foundation of assurance to "the blood and righteousness of *Christ* revealed in the Gospel," rather than to the more general wording, "the truth of the promises of salvation." Obviously this isn't an essential change, as all the promises of God are "amen" only in and through Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20); nonetheless, The Savoy Declaration's wording (later adopted by the Second London Confession), like Owen's, was more pointed.

¹⁰⁸ 2:264-74; Packer, "Puritan Idea of Communion with God," p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ For general information, consult *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*, ed. A. G. Matthews (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1959), which includes a helpful historical introduction and an accurate Savoy text highlighting each departure from or addition to the Confession. The working committee of the Savoy Declaration consisted of Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, William Bridge, William Greenhil, Joseph Caryl (all of whom were members of the Westminster Assembly), and John Owen, who, since the Westminster Standards, had attained the reputation of being one of the most influential theologians in England. For Owen's particular influence and leadership at Savoy, shared to a degree with Nye, see Wallace, "Life and Thought of John Owen," pp. 298-308. (See Williston Walker, ed., *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893], pp. 340ff. for general information and bibliographical material on The Savoy Declaration.)

¹¹¹ Matthews, *The Savoy Declaration*, p. 98. I have italicized the changes from the Confession. Sections 18.3 and 18.4 of the Confession were left unchanged. In Section 18.1 "hypocrites" was changed to "temporary believers."

In *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, Owen made a point of discussing where Reformed thought fixed assurance and trust. He said that was: (1) “principally on the grace, love, and mercy of God”; (2) “principally on the Lord Christ, his mediation, and the benefits thereof”; (3) “in believing on the promises”; and (4) on “the pardon of sin and eternal life.” His conclusion was:

Allowing therefore their proper place unto the promises, and unto the effect of all in the pardon of sins and eternal life, that which I shall further confirm is, *that the Lord Christ, in the work of his mediation, as the ordinance of God for the recovery and salvation of lost sinners, is the proper adequate object of justifying faith.*¹¹²

Owen was concerned here with more than Socinianism, which he later refuted. He also was trying to hold back the winds of Quakerism, which taught that Christ formed within us justifies. Owen wanted to stress that *Christ’s blood* secures salvation, and *His righteousness* covers sin. Hence, assurance does not come from anything we accomplish. Neither does it come primarily through Christ formed within us, for Christ only dwells in those who have learned by grace to trust in His saving death. Christ within does not justify—only His death does that. Christ within, together with its fruits, is the result of justification.

The second change, which substituted “and on the immediate witness of the Spirit” for “the testimony of the Spirit,” filled in the silence of the Confession on whether this testimony is synonymous with or different from the practical syllogism. Both the “and,” as well as the “immediate,” were consistent with Owen’s view. However, it may be that Thomas Goodwin should be credited with this change because of his insistence on separating the syllogisms from the immediate witness of the Spirit.¹¹³

The third change, which put “testify our adoption” in place of “whereby we are sealed,” appeared to concede to Owen’s view that the sealing of the Spirit is common to every believer. “Testifying” is harmonious with Owen’s conviction that in full assurance the Spirit testifies to the believer what he already possesses from God’s side.

The multiple authorship of *The Savoy Declaration* makes Owen’s direct influence difficult to prove, however. So let us simply agree here that *The Savoy Declaration* retains and explains in its own way what’s written in the Westminster Confession.¹¹⁴

An Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX (1668)

Personal Crises

Two crises in the life of Owen contributed to his most exhaustive treatment of assurance. Owen included that treatment of assurance in *An Exposition upon Psalm CXXX*, 75 per cent of which is

¹¹² 5:88-89.

¹¹³ Cf. *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, 1:227-67. See pp. 259-65 below.

¹¹⁴ See Matthews, *The Savoy Declaration*, pp. 39ff. for the aftermath of Savoy.

devoted to the verse: “But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.” Hence Owen’s treatment of assurance is expository, not systematic.

One crisis that led to this exposition of Psalm 130 was Owen’s five-year struggle for personal assurance of salvation. That struggle was not resolved until the winter of 1642-43, when Owen was helped by a preacher, whose name we do not know. Owen’s struggle had already intensified in 1637 when he left Oxford to become chaplain to Sir Robert Dormar of Ascot. Owen’s early biographer described the chaplain’s spiritual state during this period as follows: “About this time he was also exercised with many perplexing thoughts about his spiritual state, which joined with outward discouragements, threw him into a deep melancholy, that continued in its extremity for a quarter of a year; during which time he avoided almost all manner of converse, and very hardly could be induced to speak a word, and when he did speak, it was with such disorder as rendered him a wonder to many.”¹¹⁵

Though some historians suggested that Owen’s agony lessened substantially between 1638 and 1642, we know that “solid comfort”¹¹⁶ came quite suddenly to him through a sermon he heard in 1643 at Aldermanbury Chapel.

Owen had gone with a cousin to hear the famous Presbyterian minister, Edmund Calamy. Calamy was unexpectedly absent, and Owen was disappointed to see a stranger ascend the pulpit. The stranger, who preached from Matthew 8:26, “Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith,” answered all the objections Owen had raised against his own salvation. Wallace wrote, “This sermon . . . was blest for the removing of all his doubts, and laid the foundation of that solid peace, and comfort which he enjoyed as long as he lived.”¹¹⁷

This experience of grace at the end of a long period of spiritual depression set the tone for writings of the 26-year-old Owen that would span the next four decades. Owen’s stress on conviction of sin as a necessary prelude to experimental grace never diminished. More than a quarter of a century later, Owen’s experience of personal assurance was still coloring his exposition of Psalm 130. Indeed, some writers have suggested that the entire exposition was largely an account of Owen’s spiritual development.¹¹⁸

Another crisis in Owen’s life prompted his exposition of *Psalm CXXX*. Owen said to a friend who visited him:

I myself preached Christ some years, when I had but very little, if any, experimental acquaintance with access to God through Christ; until the Lord was pleased to visit me with sore affliction, whereby I was brought to the mouth of the grave and under which my soul was oppressed with horror and darkness; but God graciously relieved my spirit by a powerful application of Psalm cxxx.4, ‘But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared;’ from whence I

¹¹⁵ Asty, “Memoirs,” p. iv.; cf. Orme, *Life of the Rev. John Owen*, pp. 11-12.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹¹⁷ Wallace, “Life and Thought of John Owen,” p. 115. See Orme, *Life of the Rev. John Owen*, pp. 12ff.; Godfrey Noel Vose, “Profile of a Puritan: John Owen, 1616-1683” (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1963), p. 34.

¹¹⁸ Kirby, *Threefold Bond*, p. 19; cf. Orme, *Life of the Rev. John Owen*, pp. 17-18. For the popularity of this work in the Netherlands, see van der Haar, *From Abbadie to Young*, p. 92.

received special instruction, peace, and comfort, in drawing near to God through the Mediator, and preached thereupon immediately after my recovery.¹¹⁹

William Goold wrote, “The incident to which he refers had occurred at an early period in his public life; and it is probable this Exposition is the substance of the discourses which he preached on his recovery from affliction, under the influence of enlivened faith in the mediation of Christ.”¹²⁰

Enlargement Upon the Westminster Confession

Owen’s exposition on assurance in *Psalm CXXX* can best be understood within the framework of the Westminster Confession’s teachings on assurance.

The Attainability of Assurance

Owen plainly asserted the attainability of assurance. He wrote: “There may be a gracious persuasion and assurance of faith in a man concerning his own *particular interest* in forgiveness. A man may, many do, believe it for themselves, so as not only to have the benefit of it but the comfort also.”¹²¹

The attainability of assurance must be understood in relationship to faith, however. Owen unreservedly supported an organic relationship between faith and assurance but no confusion between the two. He believed faith included persuasion of the availability of divine forgiveness, but said that did not necessarily include the personal application of forgiveness—which alone gives rise to full assurance. He wrote, “There is or may be a saving persuasion or discovery of forgiveness in God, where there is no assurance of any particular interest therein.”¹²²

Of the element of trust in faith that cleaves to God, Owen wrote: “This a soul *cannot* do, without a discovery of forgiveness in God; but this a soul *may* do, without a special assurance of his own interest therein.”¹²³ For Owen, personal knowledge of inclusion in God’s grace usually happens sometime after initial belief, according to God’s sovereign timing. Consequently, Owen could write that regarding assurance of salvation and its accompanying phenomena of joy and glorying in the Lord as of the essence of faith, would result in soul deception:

It is this peace, this joy, this glorying in the Lord, that you would always be in the possession of. I say, you do well to desire them, to seek and labour after them,—they are purchased by Christ for believers; but you will do well to consider under what notion you do desire them. If you look on these things as belonging to the *essence of faith*, without which you can have no real interest in forgiveness or

¹¹⁹ 6:324. Cf. Middleton, *Biographia Evangelica* 3:473.

¹²⁰ 6:324.

¹²¹ 6:413.

¹²² 6:415.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

acceptance with God, you greatly deceive your own souls, and put yourselves out of the way of obtaining of them. These things are not believing, nor adequate effects of it, so as immediately to be produced wherever faith is; but they are such consequents of it as may or may not ensue upon it, according to the will of God. Faith is a seed that contains them *virtually*, and out of which they may be in due time educed by the working of the word and Spirit; and the way for any soul to be made partaker of them is to wait on the sovereignty of God's grace, who createth peace in the exercise of faith upon the promises.¹²⁴

Assurance Normative but not Common

Like the Westminster Confession, Owen regarded assurance as normative though not necessarily common. That was consistent with the Confession's teaching that there are degrees and various kinds of assurance. All true believers possess some assurance, but few can claim the blessing of "full assurance." Owen wrote, "*This discovery of forgiveness in God is great, holy, and mysterious, and which very few on gospel grounds do attain unto. . . . Even one experimental embracement of it [i.e., the full assurance of personal interest in divine forgiveness], even at the hour of death, doth well deserve the waiting and obedience of the whole course of a man's life. . . . It is a great and rare thing to have forgiveness in God discovered unto a sinful soul. . . .*"¹²⁵

Believers who gain full assurance of forgiveness by God don't find it quickly or easily. Those who don't understand that can substitute a notion of forgiveness in God for personal forgiveness from God. Owen wrote of such people:

To convince such poor creatures of the folly of their presumption, I would but desire them to go to some real believers that are or may be known unto them. Let them be asked whether they came so easily by their faith and apprehensions of forgiveness or no. "Alas!" saith one, "these twenty years have I been following after God, and yet I have not arrived unto an abiding cheering persuasion of it." "I know what it cost me, what trials, difficulties, temptations I wrestled with, and went through withal, before I obtained it," saith another.¹²⁶

Owen also believed that believers with full assurance were never safe from attacks on their faith. Still, even when a believer is spiritually "cast down," assurance is not altogether lost (Psalm 42); rather, assurance may continue even under a deep sense of indwelling sin and infirmity. Owen wrote:

This life is not a season to be always taking wages in; our work is not yet done; we are not always to abide in this mount; we must down again into the battle,—fight again, cry again, complain again. Shall the soul be thought now to have lost its assurance? Not at all. It had before assurance with joy, triumph, and exaltation; it hath it now, or may have, with wrestling, cries, tears, and supplications. And a

¹²⁴ 6:563.

¹²⁵ 6:386, 431, 598. (Cf. 6:414, 423, 425, 505-511.)

¹²⁶ 6:508-509.

man's assurance may be as good, as true, when he lies on the earth with a sense of sin, as when he is carried up to the third heaven with a sense of love and foretaste of glory.¹²⁷

Here Owen not only confirmed but went beyond section 18.4 of the Westminster Confession. For Owen, conviction of sin and assurance of salvation were not antagonistic. Rather, both should be sought, and both are given and retained by God's grace. Though full assurance is difficult to obtain, true believers must strive for it. As Owen wrote: "*It is the duty of every believer to labour after an assurance of a personal interest in forgiveness, and to be diligent in the cherishing and preservation of it when it is attained. . . . It is no small evil in believers not to be pressing after perfection in believing and obedience.*"¹²⁸

The Christian need not despair if he comes short of reaching such assurance, for God may have wise reasons for withholding it from him. Owen wrote: "Some servants that are ill husbands must have their wages kept for them to the year's end, or it will do them no good. It may be, some would be such spendthrifts of satisfying peace and joy, and be so diverted by them from attending unto some necessary duties,—as of humiliation, mortification, and self-abasement, without which their souls cannot live,—that it would not be much to their advantage to be intrusted with assurance. It is from the same care and love that peace and joy are detained from some believers, and granted unto others."¹²⁹

Despite God's wisdom and sovereignty, however, lack of assurance is ordinarily due to the believer's shortcomings. As Owen wrote: "In *ordinary dispensations of God* towards us, and dealings with us, *it is mostly our own negligence and sloth* that we come short of this assurance. . . . Considering what promises are made unto us, what encouragements are given us, what love and tenderness there is in God to receive us, I cannot but conclude that ordinarily the cause of our coming short of this assurance is where I have fixed it."¹³⁰

Owen went on to show how lack of assurance is primarily the believer's fault by citing saints of Scripture, who possessed full assurance. He wrote: "Generally, all the saints mentioned in Scripture had this [full] assurance, unless it were in the case of depths, distresses, and desertsions, such as that in this psalm [i.e., Psalm 130]. David expresseth his confidence of the love and favour of God unto his own soul hundreds of times; Paul doth the same for himself: Gal. ii., 20, 'Christ loved me, and gave himself for me.'"¹³¹

Although Owen did not specifically say so, those examples helped him keep a balance between the supposed normality of full assurance and the lack of assurance he saw in most of the believers of his day. Hence, Owen believed that many believers were living below their privileges, not sufficiently relishing the comfort of full assurance, either out of ignorance or because of sin. In either case, the contemporary church was backsliding compared to scriptural saints.

¹²⁷ 6:551; cf. 6:548-51.

¹²⁸ 6:413; cf. 6:414 where Owen implied that the Christian's striving after full assurance is a mark of grace.

¹²⁹ 6:563; cf. 6:554. The notion that God "gives us such assurance as is appropriate for us" is common to later writers as well (cf. John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on Spiritual Comfort* [London: for J. Ogle, 1814], p. 20).

¹³⁰ 6:413-15.

¹³¹ 6:413.

Finally, Owen tried to lessen the gap between the normative assurance of the biblical saints and the predominant lack of assurance in his generation. He did that by distinguishing between full assurance applied on a regular basis for daily living and full assurance received for fleeting moments particularly in times of heavy trial. Though Christians of his day did not commonly experience full assurance on a daily basis as scriptural saints did, they did receive full assurance in times of heavy trial. As Owen wrote:

I am persuaded that there are but few believers, but that God doth, at one time or other, in one duty or other, entering into or coming out of one temptation or another, give some singular testimony unto their own soul and consciences concerning their sincerity and his acceptance of them. Sometimes he doth this in a duty, wherein he hath enabled the soul to make so near an approach unto him as that it hath been warmed, enlivened, sweetened, satisfied with the presence, the gracious presence of God;—sometimes, when a man is entering into any great temptation, trial, difficult or dangerous duty, that death itself is feared in it, God comes in, by one means or other . . . and thereby testifies to him his sincerity . . .;—sometimes he is pleased to shine immediately into the soul in the midst of its darkness and sorrow; wherewith it is . . . thereby relieved against its own pressing self-condemnation. . . . But now these are all wrought by a transient operation of the Spirit. . . . These things abide not in their sense and in their power which they have upon our affections, but immediately pass away.¹³²

Owen's approach to assurance may be summarized in the following chart:

Normativity of Assurance

<i>Degrees of assurance</i>	<i>Biblical saints</i>	<i>Owen's contemporaries</i>
1. Is there a regular degree of assurance for believers who trust in God's forgiveness of sinners?	Yes, for this degree of assurance is part of faith itself.	Same as for biblical saints.
2. Is there a full degree of assurance for believers that comes for brief moments, particularly in times of trial, i.e., that God's forgiveness is also personally for them?	Yes, generally speaking.	Yes, generally speaking, though such experiences may be rare and fleeting, and in some lacking altogether.

¹³² 6:593.

3. Is there a full degree of assurance for believers that comes in a more regular, abiding, strengthening manner, and which reaps a comfortable sense of daily favor except in uncommon periods of divine desertion?	Yes, generally speaking, though such believers remained subject to many assaults and much variation with regards to their full assurance.	Usually not, for few come up to this gospel assurance. Those who experience this have found it difficult to retain; they remain subject to assaults and variations on full assurance.
--	---	---

Owen's approach to full assurance was in harmony with that of the Westminster Confession, though he moved beyond it by distinguishing full assurance in an abiding sense from a more fleeting sense; and by distinguishing the state of adherence from the state of assurance.¹³³

How Assurance is Obtained

Owen's theology on *how assurance is obtained* is very much like that of the Westminster Confession, section 18.2, which says assurance is obtained through the promises of salvation in Jesus Christ, as well as through inward evidences of saving grace and the testimony of the Spirit of adoption. Specifically, Owen taught the following:

(1) The primary ground of assurance is the promises of God, specifically the satisfying blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, embraced by faith. Owen wrote: "The soul, by a direct act of faith, believes its own forgiveness, without making inferences or gathering conclusions; and may do so upon the proposition of it to be believed in the promise."¹³⁴

Aside from stressing the Christ-centered focus of these promises as previously discussed,¹³⁵ Owen had nothing new to add to this ground of assurance.

(2) The primary ground of assurance leads the believer to the secondary ground, for he who trusts in the objective promises of God in Jesus Christ will yearn to have those promises to be subjectively "testified unto his conscience in a word of promise mixed by faith."¹³⁶

According to Owen, that testimony is one of two secondary grounds of assurance and is based on inward evidences of saving grace realized syllogistically. Here Owen's view varied slightly from the Westminster Confession, which left open the possibility that the secondary grounds of assurance could be treated as a single unity. Along with his recognition of the immediate witness of the Spirit, Owen validated the practical syllogism as God's ordinary way of bestowing assurance. He wrote, "A due spiritual consideration of the causes and effects of

¹³³ 6:426-27. Cf. 6:413-25, 593-95, and 3:388.

¹³⁴ 6:413; cf. 6:407.

¹³⁵ See pp. 187-88 above.

¹³⁶ 6:424.

regeneration is the ordinary way and means whereby the souls of believers come to be satisfied concerning that work of God in them and upon them.”¹³⁷

Owen then added three warnings about the practical syllogism. He said, first, direct acts of faith do not excuse the individual from seeking the certainty of the Spirit’s work.¹³⁸ Second, Owen emphasized that the Holy Spirit sheds light upon His own work in the soul by the Word, thereby giving the believer liberty to embrace the “evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made” (Westminster Confession, 18.2). Owen wrote:

The Spirit of Christ acquaints the soul that this and that grace is from him, that this or that duty was performed in his strength. He brings to mind what at such and such times was wrought in men by himself, to give them supportment and relief in the times of depths and darkness. And when it hath been clearly discovered unto the soul at any time by the Holy Ghost, that any thing wrought in it or done by it hath been truly saving, the comfort of it will abide in the midst of many shakings and temptations.¹³⁹

Third, Owen insisted that this form of assurance may be consciously absent from the believer, regardless of whether the Spirit’s graces are presently active within him. He explained:

A man may have grace, and yet not have it at sometimes much acting; he may have grace for life, when he hath it not for fruitfulness and comfort, though it be his duty so to have it, Rev. iii. 2; 2 Tim. i. 6. And a man may have *grace acting* in him, and yet *not know*, not be sensible, that he hath acting grace. We see persons frequently under great temptations of apprehension that they have no grace at all, and yet at the same time, to the clearest conviction of all who are able to discern spiritual things, sweetly and genuinely to act faith, love, submission unto God, and that in a high and eminent manner.¹⁴⁰

(3) In advocating an immediate witness of the Spirit, Owen prevented this experience from becoming too mystical in the following ways. First, he said the Holy Spirit applies His immediate witness through the Word, not beyond the Word. Thus this witness, which is the direct, miraculous, and powerful application of the Word in God’s sovereign time and way, is both Spirit-applied *and* Word-centered.¹⁴¹

Second, Owen said the immediate witness wasn’t always separated from the practical syllogism; consequently, they often supported each other. Owen illustrated that in his dialogue with a “poor soul that now walks comfortably under the light of God’s countenance.” In answer to the question “But how are you confirmed in this persuasion?” he wrote:

¹³⁷ 6:5; cf. 6:8, 455-60.

¹³⁸ 6:413.

¹³⁹ 6:546; cf. 6:407.

¹⁴⁰ 6:564.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Practice*, pp. 41, 43 and John Murray’s review of Nuttall, *Collected Writings* 3:328.

That *sense* of it which I have in my heart; that *sweetness* and rest which I have experience of; that *influence* it hath upon my soul; that *obligation* I find laid upon me by it unto all thankful obedience; that relief, supportment, and consolation that it hath afforded me in trials and troubles, in the mouth of the grave and entrances of eternity,—all answering what is declared concerning these things in the word,—will not suffer me to be deceived. I could not, indeed, receive it until God was pleased to speak it unto me; but now let Satan do his utmost, I shall never cease to bear this testimony, that there is mercy and forgiveness with him.¹⁴²

Third, Owen said that the immediate testimony of the Spirit should not be expected or depended upon because of its extraordinary role as a sovereign gift. Moreover, because the Spirit's immediate testimony is sovereign, no one can say exactly how full assurance should be experienced. Owen thus wrote:

*If you are doubtful concerning your state and condition, do not expect an extraordinary determination of it by an immediate testimony of the Spirit of God. I do grant that God doth sometimes, by this means, bring in peace and satisfaction unto the soul. He gives his own Spirit immediately "to bear witness with ours that we are the children of God," both upon the account of regeneration and adoption. He doth so; but, as far as we can observe, in a way of sovereignty, when and to whom he pleaseth. . . . No one man's experience is a rule unto others, and an undue apprehension of it is a matter of great danger. Yet it is certain that humble souls in extraordinary cases may have recourse unto it with benefit and relief thereby. This, then, you may desire, you may pray for, but not with such a frame of spirit as to refuse that other satisfaction which in the ways of truth and peace you may find. This is the putting of the hand into the side of Christ; but "blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."*¹⁴³

Retaining, Renewing, and Improving Assurance

Finally, in *Psalm CXXX*, Owen showed how a believer may retain, renew, and improve personal assurance of grace. He said that can be done through three activities of faith: "recalling" grace, "waiting on" grace, and fruitful obedience.¹⁴⁴

The Christian must first seek grace to recall the Spirit's past, assuring work in order to improve upon his present degree of assurance. Owen indicated in the following passage that he knew the typical believer seeks such grace far too seldom:

¹⁴² 6:460.

¹⁴³ 6:594.

¹⁴⁴ Owen also gave guidelines for richer discoveries of assurance. He advised: allow Christ to be the judge of your spiritual condition; remember that "self-condemnation and abhorrency do very well consist with gospel justification and peace"; consider that patient waiting will reap a fuller sense of forgiveness in due season; engage in self-examination, "even to the sins of youth"; learn to distinguish between unbelief and jealousy, as well as between faith and spiritual sense; do not mix "foundation [Christ alone] and building work [holiness and obedience] too much together"; "take heed of spending time in complaints when vigorous actings of grace are your duty"; beware of hard thoughts against God; make use of every appearance of God (2:542-74).

The true use of [past assurances of divine favor] is, to lay them up and ponder them in our hearts, that they may be supportments and testimonies unto us in a time of need. Have you, then, who are now in the dark as to your state or conditions, whether you are regenerate or no, ever received any such refreshing and cheering testimony from God given unto your integrity, and your acceptance with him thereupon? Call it over again, and make use of it against those discouragements which arise from your present darkness in this matter, and which keep you off from sharing in the consolation tendered unto you in this word of grace.¹⁴⁵

Recalling grace may also reveal defects in the believer that thwart assurance. As Owen said:

Call to mind whether you have broken off the treaty with God, and refused his terms. What is the reason, since God hath graciously begun to deal thus with you, that you are not yet come to a thorough close with him in the work and design of his grace? The defect must of necessity lie on your parts. God doth nothing in vain. Had he not been willing to receive you, he would not have dealt with you so far as he hath done. There is nothing, then, remains to firm your condition but a resolved act of your own wills in answering the mind and will of God. And by this search may the soul come to satisfaction in this matter, or at least find out and discover where the stick is whence their uncertainty doth arise, and what is wanting to complete their desire.¹⁴⁶

Next, the Christian must wait for grace in order to renew and improve assurance. As Owen wrote: “*Whatever your condition be, and your apprehension of it, yet continue waiting for a better issue, and give not over through weariness or impatience. . . . Waiting is the only way to establishment and assurance; we cannot speed by haste; yea, nothing puts the end so far away as making too much haste. . . . Doth not the nature of [assurance] require humble waiting? . . . No disappointment, then, no tediousness or weariness, should make the soul leave waiting on God, if it intend to attain consolation and establishment.*”¹⁴⁷

Finally, while recalling and waiting for grace, the Christian must strive for obedience. Indeed, faith and obedience are ultimately inseparable. Said Owen, “The more faith that is true and of the right kind, the more obedience; for all our obedience is the obedience of faith.”¹⁴⁸

According to Owen, such obedience manifests itself in “the choicest actings of our souls towards God,—as love, delight, rejoicing in the Lord, peace, joy, and consolation in ourselves, readiness to do or suffer, cheerfulness in so doing. If they grow not from this root, yet their flourishing wholly depends upon it; so that surely it is the duty of every believer to break through

¹⁴⁵ 6:595.

¹⁴⁶ 6:596.

¹⁴⁷ 6:553-55; cf. 6:563.

¹⁴⁸ 6:414.

all difficulties in pressing after this particular assurance.”¹⁴⁹ In short, the way to retain and improve assurance is through obedience, which is also the fruit of assurance.

***Pneumatologia:
A Discourse on the Holy Spirit (1674ff.)***

In the preface of his most influential work, *Pneumatologia*, Owen admitted he was doing pioneer work. He wrote: “Whereas I know not any who ever went before me in this design of representing the whole economy of the Holy Spirit, with all his adjuncts, operations, and effects, whereof this is the first part, . . . as the difficulty of my work was increased thereby so it may plead my excuse if anything be found not to answer so regular a projection or just a method as the nature of the subject requireth and as was aimed at.”¹⁵⁰

Later theologians weren’t so modest about Owen’s 1,200-page treatise on the Holy Spirit. George Smeaton called it “the most important work on the Spirit in any literature.”¹⁵¹ Abraham Kuyper said the work was incomparable and unsurpassed.¹⁵² Geoffrey Nuttall affirmed Owen’s pioneer attempt, particularly in the domain of experimental theology;¹⁵³ while Jerry Brauer acknowledged that Owen wrote “the most comprehensive treatise on the Spirit since the days of the Church fathers.”¹⁵⁴ Though Puritan writers produced many works on the Spirit, Owen was unquestionably the leader in this field.

Most of *Pneumatologia* was published in 1674.¹⁵⁵ Other parts were published piecemeal. Owen himself was never certain that he would complete the project, which would include “The Reason of Faith” (1677), “The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God” (1678), “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer” (1682), “On the Work of the Spirit as a Comforter,” and “Spiritual Gifts” (both published in 1693 after Owen’s death). That completed, according to Owen’s notes, his entire schema on the Holy Spirit.

In his section on the Spirit as Comforter, Owen addressed the question of assurance by dealing with two aspects of the Spirit’s work not yet examined: sealing and unction.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.; cf. 6:551-53 where hope, casting out fear, and dying for Christ are also expounded as marks of the obedience of faith.

¹⁵⁰ 3:7.

¹⁵¹ *Work of the Holy Spirit* (reprint ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 329.

¹⁵² *Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri de Vries (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900), p. x.

¹⁵³ *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*, p. 7.

¹⁵⁴ “Reflections on the Nature of English Puritanism,” *Church History* 23 (1954):102.

¹⁵⁵ Volume 3 of the Goold edition, which may be subsumed under doctrinal and experimental theology. Under doctrinal theology, Owen considered the deity of the Spirit and His relation to creation and the Person of Christ; under experimental theology, he examined regeneration and sanctification. Little of this volume relates directly to assurance, however, with the exception of two passages on sanctification.

The Sealing of the Spirit

The sealing of the Spirit was a common theme in the seventeenth century. Most Puritan writers believed that sealing came with assurance,¹⁵⁶ even though early Reformers had clearly maintained a one-to-one correlation between those regenerated by the Spirit and those sealed by the Spirit. Calvin, for example, would have refuted the Puritan notion that it was possible to believe without being sealed with the Spirit by declaring that the seal is the Holy Spirit Himself¹⁵⁷ and that the sealing work of the Spirit belongs to the essence of faith.¹⁵⁸ Beza also appeared to have that belief. He wrote: “Now he maketh the Ephesians (or rather all the Gentiles) equall to the Jewes, because that notwithstanding they came last, yet being called by the same Gospel, they embraced it by faith and were sealed up with the same Spirit, which is the pledge of election until the inheritance it selfe be seene.”¹⁵⁹

By the time of Perkins, however, theologians were devoting less time to the Spirit as sealer and more to the Spirit’s activity in sealing the promise to the believer. As Perkins noted: “Things that passe too and fro among men, though they be in question, yet when the seale is put too, they are made out of doubt: and therefore when God by his spirit is said to seale the promise in the heart of every particular beleever, it signifieth that hee gives unto them evident assurance that the promise of life belongs unto them.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, in sealing, Perkins taught that the Spirit begets an assured “trust and confidence” in the promises so that the believer is moved to experimentally embrace the promises as his own.¹⁶¹

Paul Baynes, who succeeded Perkins at Cambridge University,¹⁶² attempted to unite the Spirit’s roles as indweller and seal in an attempt to bring harmony between the Reformed and Puritan views.¹⁶³ “The Holy Spirit, and the graces of the Spirit are the seale assuring our redemption,” he wrote.¹⁶⁴ For Baynes, the Spirit was thus both “the seale and the sealer.”¹⁶⁵ He wrote: “We are confirmed touching salvation, both by the Spirit of God, who is as it were the

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, pp. 116-24; Robert Martin Boyle, “The Doctrine of the Witness of the Holy Spirit in John Calvin’s Theology against an Historical Background” (M.A. thesis, Abilene Christian College, 1967).

¹⁵⁷ E.g., *Commentary* (on Ephesians 1:13-14, 3:12); Inst. 3.2.11, 34, 41. Cf. Parratt, “The Witness of the Holy Spirit: Calvin, the Puritans and St. Paul,” pp. 161ff.

¹⁵⁸ Graafland, “Waarheid in het Binnenste,” p. 58.

¹⁵⁹ Beza, *Novum Testamentum* (on Ephesians 1:13).

¹⁶⁰ Merrill, *William Perkins, 1558-1602, on Discourse on Conscience*, pp. 50-51.

¹⁶¹ Perkins, *Works* 1:104-105. Cf. Preston, *The Breast-Plate of Faith and Love* 2:53-55.

¹⁶² As Baynes published no writings himself, we are indebted to William Ames and others for seeing his writings to press posthumously (cf. bibliography). See Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, pp. 94-102, for a brief biography and synopsis of Baynes’s doctrine of faith and assurance.

¹⁶³ Paul Baynes, *An Entire Commentary upon the whole Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians* (London: M. F. for Milbourne and I. Bartlet, 1643), pp. 80-81.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, eighth unnumbered prefatory page.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

seale sealing, and by the graces of the Spirit, which is as it were the seal sealed and printed upon us; yea, these two, both of them, are together as a seal.”¹⁶⁶

Baynes distinguished being sealed by the Spirit (which all believers possess) and being made conscious of such sealing (which only those who are conscious of the graces of the Spirit possess). Baynes thus could speak of an immediate witness in the sealing of the Holy Spirit, while linking such a witness to the practical syllogism, since only a sanctified conscience could echo the Spirit’s testimony. He wrote: “This certainty is no other thing than the testimony of a renewed conscience, which doth wnesse through the spirit, that we are in a state of grace. . . . I call it a testimony of the conscience . . . for the conscience doth but speake it as an echo; that it testifieth to us both our present state of Grace.”¹⁶⁷

Though the Spirit’s sealing grants the believer infallible assurance,¹⁶⁸ many years may pass before the believer experiences it. Baynes pictured the Christian’s growth in assurance as stages. “Childhoode or infancie” lacks full assurance, “middle age” has some measure of assurance, and “olde age, or the experienced estate hath assurance accompanying it for the most part usually.”¹⁶⁹

Richard Sibbes (1577-1635),¹⁷⁰ agreed with his predecessor Baynes, though he emphasized the sealing of the Spirit as a “superadded work and confirmation” of the believer’s faith.¹⁷¹ In so doing, Sibbes turned the doctrine of the sealing of the Spirit in a direction that would gain prominence among the Puritans for several decades.¹⁷²

Sibbes thought of the Spirit’s sealing in two ways: (1) a one-time sealing, and (2) a sealing that came later as one matured in the Christian life. The once-and-for-all sealing of salvation is granted when a person first believes in Christ and God’s promises. Sibbes taught that as a king’s image is stamped upon wax, so the Spirit stamps believers’ souls with the image of Christ from the very moment of believing. Such sealing produces in every believer a lifelong desire to be transformed fully into the image of Christ.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁶⁹ *Briefe Directions unto a Godly Life: wherein every Christian is furnished with most Necessary Helps for the Furthering of him in a godly Course here upon Earth, so that He may Attaine Eternall Happiness in Heaven* (London: A. Griffins for J. Norton, 1637), pp. 44-46, 92-94.

¹⁷⁰ See *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes* 1:xix-cxxi for a biographical sketch of Sibbes. (Hereafter, *Complete Works*.) Cf. Mark Dever, “Richard Sibbes and the ‘Truly Evangelicall Church of England’: A Study in Reformed Divinity and Early Stuart Conformity” (Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, 1992).

¹⁷¹ Sibbes preached often on the Spirit’s sealing. First, a series of sermons transcribed by a noblewoman, Lady Elizabeth Brooke, was published in 1637 as *A Fountain Sealed* (*Complete Works* 5:409-456). Second, sermons on 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 in the *Exposition of Second Corinthians Chapter 1*, were published in 1655 (*Complete Works* 3:420-84). Third, a sermon on Romans 8:15-16, *The Witness of the Spirit*, was first published in 1692 (*Complete Works* 7:367-85). Cf. *ibid.*, 2:453-64, 4:132ff., 6:374-79, 428-30.

¹⁷² Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, p. 118. Cf. Eaton, *Baptism with the Spirit*, pp. 67-75.

¹⁷³ *Complete Works* 3:453.

The second aspect of Sibbes's doctrine of sealing is more elusive. Owen argued that Sibbes said sealing had to occur twice in the life of the believer. But Sibbes was not arguing for a second measure of *positional assurance*, as if to imply that God was not altogether sure of our stance with Him or His stance towards us upon conversion. Sibbes plainly stated: "Sealing of us by the Spirit is not in regard of God but ourselves. God knoweth who are His, but we know not that we are His but by sealing. The sealing then is *for our benefit exclusively*, and not for God."¹⁷⁴

So the second kind of sealing Sibbes wrote about was a process. It was the kind of assurance that could increase gradually throughout believers' lives by means of singular experiences and by daily, spiritual growth. This sealing had degrees; it could grow with spiritual maturity. Sibbes wrote: "The Spirit sealeth by degrees. As our care of pleasing the Spirit increaseth so our comfort increaseth. Our light will increase as the morning light unto the perfect day. Yielding to the Spirit in one holy motion will cause him to lead us to another, and so on forwards, until we be more deeply acquainted with the whole counsel of God concerning our salvation."¹⁷⁵

Sibbes learned through pastoral experience that many believers are content with the measure of faith and assurance they receive upon their conversion and do not labor for further growth. That prompted Sibbes to suggest that there are three kinds of Christians: First, those who have the seed of saving faith but live under a spirit of bondage;¹⁷⁶ those who are sealed with "sanctifying grace" by means of Spirit-worked evidences of faith but are often beset with doubt; and established believers, "who are carried with large spirits to obey their Father"¹⁷⁷ as the fruit of the direct seal of the Spirit which provides a conscious persuasion of their sonship to God.¹⁷⁸ "Large spirits" receive a "privy seal," or the unmistakable, conclusive, inward witness of the Spirit¹⁷⁹ that is a "stablishing, confirming grace."¹⁸⁰ That seal grants believers freedom to appropriate full assurance through the work of each Person in the Trinity. The emphasis here is on the Spirit in His saving activity. Sibbes thus wrote:

Every person in the blessed Trinity hath their several work. The Father chooseth us and passeth a decree upon the whole groundwork of our salvation. The Son executeth it to the full. The Spirit applieth it, and witnesseth our interest in it by leading our souls to lay hold upon him, and by raising up our souls in the assurance of it, and by breeding and cherishing sweet communion with Father and Son, who both of them seal us likewise by the Spirit. This joy and comfort is so appropriated to the Spirit, as it carrieth the very name of the Spirit.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁴ *Complete Works* 3:453ff.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Complete Works* 5:437.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:110ff.; 5:488.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 7:382-83.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 4:138-39, 5:433.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:422.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5:439.

Sibbes sounds mystical at times in describing this special sealing, particularly in statements such as “the Holy Ghost slides and insinuates and infuseth himself into our souls.”¹⁸² But Sibbes warded off mysticism in two ways. First, he maintained that this special sealing must never be divorced from the Word of God. By speaking of sealing in degrees, Sibbes linked all advancement in grace to the Spirit and Word, for any consciousness of sealing by the Spirit is always through the applied Word.¹⁸³

Second, Sibbes said that the genuineness of such sealing may be readily examined. One may know the voice of the Spirit of God by inquiring what went before, what went with, and what followed “this ravishing joy” of experimental sealing, Sibbes wrote.¹⁸⁴ Fruits of sanctification, such as peace of conscience, the spirit of adoption, prayers of fervent supplication, conformity with the heavenly image of Christ,¹⁸⁵ and applying ourselves to holy duties rather than old lusts inevitably result from such “a secret whispering and intimation to the soul.”¹⁸⁶ Sibbes thus emphasized both the intuitive testimony of the Spirit and the sanctifying fruits of the Spirit.¹⁸⁷ The Spirit’s sealing is inward in its essence and outward in its fruit.

Owen understood why Sibbes and other Puritans in his era proposed what he considered a second kind of sealing. He recognized that Sibbes and others were attempting to call believers to a life of *assuredness*. Owen affirmed the call for this kind of assurance, yet he argued against equating full assurance with the sealing of the Spirit. He felt that the exegesis of Ephesians 1:13 didn’t support such a view.

Moving a step beyond Sibbes, John Preston (1587-1628)¹⁸⁸ taught that the sealing of the Spirit was a second work given to those who overcome.¹⁸⁹ The seal was so “high” in the Christian’s experience that when pressed for a definition, Preston could only write: “It is a thing that we cannot expresse, it is a certain divine expression of light, a certain unexpressable

¹⁸² Ibid., 1:24; cf. 4:215, 295.

¹⁸³ Cary Weisiger III neglected Sibbes’s connection between Word and Spirit when he concluded that “the sealing of the Spirit in Sibbes is as close as Puritanism came to the Pentecostal emphasis on the baptism of the Spirit” (“The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Preaching of Richard Sibbes” [Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1984], pp. i, 327ff.). Cf. Bert Affleck, Jr., “The Theology of Richard Sibbes, 1577-1635” (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1968), pp. 166-203; Frank E. Farrell, “Richard Sibbes: A Study in Early Seventeenth Century English Puritanism” (Ph.D. dissertation, Edinburgh, 1955).

¹⁸⁴ *Complete Works* 5:441-44.

¹⁸⁵ The sealing Spirit “makes them every way like Christ in their proportion” (ibid., 3:453-54; 4:132-33).

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 4:134-36, 5:409. Cf. Weisiger, “The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Preaching of Richard Sibbes,” pp. 290-95.

¹⁸⁷ For Sibbes on assurance of sanctification, see Affleck, “The Theology of Richard Sibbes,” pp. 323-27.

¹⁸⁸ For the life and times of Preston, see Irvonwy Morgan, *Puritan Spirituality* (London: Epworth Press, 1973). Preston was Cotton’s most renowned “Old England” convert. Due in part to the antinomian controversy in conjunction with Anne Hutchinson, Cotton would not commit himself definitively on whether the sealing of the Spirit should be regarded as including all believers or only those who received full assurance of faith (Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, p. 119).

¹⁸⁹ *The New Covenant, or the Saint’s Portion* 2:416-17.

assurance that we are the sonnes of God; a certaine secret manifestation, that God hath received us and put away our sinnes; I say, it is such a thing, that no man knowes, but they that have it.”¹⁹⁰

Thomas Goodwin¹⁹¹ developed the thinking of Sibbes and Preston on the sealing of the Spirit even more, defining it as a “light beyond the light of ordinary faith.”¹⁹² Goodwin wrote: “There is an immediate assurance of the Holy Ghost, by a heavenly and divine light, of a divine authority, which the Holy Ghost sheddeth in a man’s heart, (not having relation to grace wrought or anything in a man’s self,) whereby he sealet him up to the day of redemption.”¹⁹³ He added, “It is the next thing to heaven . . . you can have no more until you come thither.”¹⁹⁴

Furthermore, the “whispering” of the Holy Spirit tells the believer that he is elect of God, has his sins forgiven, and belongs to Him forever—both intuitively and directly.¹⁹⁵

Richard Baxter, David Clarkson (formerly Owen’s assistant), and several Puritan writers followed in varying degrees Goodwin’s teaching, making a direct tie between the sealing of the Spirit and full assurance of faith.

As late as 1657, Owen had not resolved the matter of the Spirit’s sealing. “I am not very clear in the certain peculiar intendment of this metaphor,” he wrote.¹⁹⁶ Ultimately, however, Owen did resolve the matter. In *Pneumatologia*, he explained how:

First, unlike Calvin, Owen said that the sealing of the Spirit applies to persons, not promises.¹⁹⁷ Moreover, he added, “When we seal a deed or grant to any one, we do not say the man is sealed, but the deed or grant.”¹⁹⁸

Second, like Calvin, Owen said the Spirit’s sealing, representing the presence of the Spirit in His Person rather than an act of the Spirit within a believer, serves as the ground of assurance. He explained: “It is not said that the Holy Spirit seals us, but that we are sealed with him. He is God’s seal unto us. . . . The effects of this sealing are gracious operations of the Holy Spirit in and upon believers; but the sealing itself is the communication of the Spirit unto them.”¹⁹⁹

Third, because Owen took issue with the idea that the seal of the Spirit was a particular act instead of the gift of the Spirit Himself, it was exegetically impossible to say that sealing was restricted to some believers rather than to all, for sealing accompanies regeneration.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 2:416; cf. 2:400-421.

¹⁹¹ See chapter 9 below.

¹⁹² *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* 1:236.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 233.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 236.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 236-37.

¹⁹⁶ 2:242.

¹⁹⁷ 1:400; cf. 2:242-43.

¹⁹⁸ 1:243.

¹⁹⁹ 4:401, 404.

²⁰⁰ 4:400.

Finally, the sealing of the Christian points directly to the sealing of Christ by the Father, Owen said. As Christ was sealed with the Spirit without measure, so each believer is sealed with the Spirit in proper measure sufficient to salvation.²⁰¹

Owen clearly recognized a difference between “full assurance by the immediate witness of the Spirit” and “the sealing of the Spirit,” despite the opinions of some of his closest friends.²⁰² The former is related to the latter as effect to cause, i.e., the sealing of the Spirit is not assurance in itself, but produces assurance. As Owen wrote:

It hath been generally conceived that this sealing with the Spirit is that which gives assurance unto believers—and so indeed, it doth, although the way whereby it doth it hath not been rightly apprehended; and, therefore, none have been able to declare the especial nature of that act of the Spirit whereby he seals us, whence such assurance should ensue. . . . That God abideth in us and we in him is the subject-matter of our assurance. . . . The Spirit himself . . . is the great evidence, the great ground of assurance, which we have that God hath taken us into a near and dear relation unto himself, “because he hath given us of his Spirit” (1 John 4:13).²⁰³

In short, Spirit-sealing is no special *act* of assurance, but reaps the special *effect* of assurance, which, by grace, grows in degrees of consciousness to a full and firm persuasion within the believer.²⁰⁴ Hence, assurance is not the same as the gift of the Spirit (the seal), even though it may accompany the gift. Though he would not deny the joy resulting from the Spirit’s immediate witness of full assurance,²⁰⁵ Owen downplayed the unusual manifestations of the Spirit in favor of a more normal recognition of the presence of the Spirit.

The Unction of the Spirit

In Book VIII, chapter 4 of *Pneumatologia*, Owen also explained the Spirit’s unction. He said the Spirit anoints all believers;²⁰⁶ such anointing happens by Christ’s own anointing with the Spirit without measure and by believers receiving their unction “immediately from Christ” as efficient cause;²⁰⁷ and it is the Spirit of Christ Himself who is the anointing.²⁰⁸ All of this takes place

²⁰¹ 4:403-406.

²⁰² 4:400-401.

²⁰³ 4:405. Cf. Eaton, *Baptism with the Spirit*, pp. 104ff.

²⁰⁴ This merges well with Owen’s conviction that the case may hang “for years” in justification in the court of conscience (2:241).

²⁰⁵ J. I. Packer, “The Witness of the Spirit: The Puritan Teaching,” *The Wisdom of Our Fathers* (Puritan Conference, 1956), p. 25.

²⁰⁶ 4:391.

²⁰⁷ 4:391-93.

within a Trinitarian framework: the “supreme donation” of the Spirit as unction is from the Father; the “immediate collation” from the Son; and the “actual anointing” from the Spirit.²⁰⁹

Nevertheless, the Spirit’s unction has special effects: “Spiritual instruction, by saving illumination in the mind of God and the mysteries of the gospel; and a special dedication unto God, in the way of a spiritual privilege.”²¹⁰ These effects serve as assistants to assurance, particularly when the soul is attacked by seducers of faith. As Owen wrote: “It is hereon that our stability in believing doth depend; for it is pleaded unto this purpose in a peculiar manner by the apostle, I John ii. 20, 27. It was the ‘unction from the Holy One’ which then kept believers from being carried from the faith by the craft of seducers. Hereby he makes men, according unto their measure, ‘of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord.’”²¹¹

In sum, the Spirit in His divine Person is the believer’s seal and his unction, resulting in the solidifying of assurance.

The Doctrine of Justification by Faith (1677)

In his work on justifying faith, Owen presented his theologically mature definition of faith. He wrote, “It is the heart’s approbation of the way of justification and salvation of sinners by Jesus Christ, proposed in the gospel, as proceeding from the grace, wisdom, and love of God, with its acquiescency therein as unto its own concernment and condition.”²¹²

Here Owen lessened his earlier emphasis on “resting” assurance as essential to faith, while he was simultaneously cautious not to exclude a trust of acquiescency. Without trust, the soul must despair, he said. Nevertheless, such trust is not *necessarily* persuasion of one’s own salvation, for that is not of the essence of faith. What is essential to faith is that the soul recognizes that the only way of salvation is in Jesus Christ and acquiesces to being included in that redemption. Hence, the soul is not bound to believe the pardon of its own sins antecedent to justification.²¹³ Here Owen parted ways with the early Reformers, as David Lachman noted:

[Owen] objects to the doctrine of the first Reformers not on the grounds that an assurance was included in justifying faith, but on the grounds that they made the pardon of our own sins in particular the object of justifying faith, making faith itself to be a fiduciary trust. But, denying that any of them affirmed that every true believer always had a full assurance and commending their objective of directing men to seek for peace with God by placing their trust and confidence in his mercy

²⁰⁸ 4:396.

²⁰⁹ 4:393, 396.

²¹⁰ 4:395.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² 5:93.

²¹³ 5:75, 76, 102.

by Christ alone, he refuses to oppose or reject their judgments, and leaves them as he finds them, “unto the use of the church.”²¹⁴

Indeed, Owen had concluded: “For I shall not contend with any about the way and manner of expressing the truth, where the *substance* of it is retained. That which in these things is aimed at, is the advancement and glory of the grace of God in Christ, with the conduct of the souls of men unto rest and peace with him. Where this is attained or aimed at, and that in the way of truth for the substance of it, variety of apprehensions and expressions concerning the same things may tend unto the useful exercise of faith and the edification of the church.”²¹⁵

Robert Letham took issue with Lachman’s position, citing Owen’s assertion that assurance is a fruit of faith, not of its essence. He concluded that Owen fundamentally differed from the Reformers. Letham, however, failed to notice two things: first, that Owen’s assertion—“All these things are rather fruits or effects of faith, as under exercise and improvement, than of the essence of it, as it is the instrument in our justification”²¹⁶—dealt with full assurance of faith that one’s own sins are forgiven, not with all degrees of assurance. Second, concerning “lower degrees” of assurance, Owen did not think it necessary to determine whether such trust or confidence is of the essence of faith or the first fruits of it, but he did describe it as “that which belongs to justifying faith, and is inseparable from it.”²¹⁷ Owen refused to repudiate the position of the Reformers but accepted it as a variation of his own.

In *Gospel Grounds and Evidences of the Faith of God’s Elect* (published in 1695), Owen defined full assurance as a step forward in faith. He wrote: “Faith is not an especial assurance of a man’s own justification and salvation by Christ; that it will produce, but not until another step or two in its progress be over; but faith is a satisfactory persuasion that the way of God proposed in the gospel is fitted, suited, and able to save the soul in particular that doth believe,—not only that it is a blessed way to save sinners in general, but that it is such a way to save him in particular.”²¹⁸

This distinction between trusting that Christ is perfectly *suited to save* the individual and being assured that *he has forgiven* the individual allowed Owen to accommodate the Reformers somewhat. It allowed him to accept a measure of assurance in saving faith, while enabling him to remain faithful to the Westminster Confession’s statement “This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith.” Second, it freed him to teach advancement in the steps of grace, while avoiding a two-tier approach to the experience of salvation. Finally, this distinction allowed Owen to retain Christological centrality in the notion of faith without quenching the smoking flax or breaking bruised reeds.²¹⁹

²¹⁴ *The Marrow Controversy*, p. 18; cf. 5:85.

²¹⁵ 5:85.

²¹⁶ 5:102, and Letham, “The Relationship Between Saving Faith and Assurance,” pp. 49ff.

²¹⁷ 5:101.

²¹⁸ 5:419.

²¹⁹ For Owen, not breaking “bruised reeds” did not intend to promote carelessness in self-examination. In fact, Keith Sprunger states that Owen’s meetings held to examine consciences were referred to by the students as “the scruple shop” (*The Learned Doctor William Ames: Dutch Backgrounds of English and American Puritanism* [Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972], p. 163).

An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews (1668-1684)²²⁰

Owen's comments on assurance in his seven-volume work on Hebrews reaffirmed earlier writings.²²¹ Two quotations are particularly enlightening.

First, Owen's notes on Hebrews 6:11 offered one of his clearest statements on full assurance as a high degree of faith that yields strength for the holy warfare of daily life. Owen wrote:

This "full assurance" is not of the nature or essence of [hope], but an *especial degree* of it in its own improvement. A weak, imperfect hope, will give but weak and imperfect relief under trouble; but that which riseth up unto the full assurance will complete our relief. Wherefore, as hope itself is necessary, so is this degree of it, especially where trials do abound. Yet neither is hope in this degree absolute, or absolutely perfect. Our minds in this world are not capable of such a degree of assurance in spiritual things as to free us from assaults to the contrary, and impressions of fear sometimes from those assaults: but there is such a degree attainable as is always victorious; which will give the soul peace at all times, and sometimes fill it with joy.²²²

Second, in his comments on Hebrews 3:12-14, Owen provided a striking conclusion on sacramental assurance. He wrote:

[Salvation] is also confirmed unto us from the nature and *use of the sacraments*. . . . In the one of them God sets his seal unto our initiation into Christ: for it is, as circumcision was of old, the "seal of the righteousness of faith," Rom. iv. 11. . . . The other expressly confirms our participation of Christ, and our interest in the pardon of sins through his blood; being appointed of God as the way whereby mutually is testified his grace unto us and our faith in him. . . . And if we may not, if we ought not, to rest assured of what God testifies unto us and sets his seal unto, it cannot but be our duty sometimes to make God a liar; for so we do when we believe not his testimony.²²³

²²⁰ Owen's four volume work in original folios was dated 1668, 1674, 1680, and 1684 respectively (Toon, *Correspondence of John Owen*, 1616-1683, pp. 176-77).

²²¹ E.g., cf. *Hebrews* 4:152-55 and 5:192, 198-202, 270-75.

²²² *Ibid.*, 5:200.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 4:155. For a summary of Owen on the Lord's Supper as a "covenant seal," see Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, pp. 220-24.

Conclusion: Owen's Influence and Pneumatological Emphasis

Owen's writings on faith and assurance have been incalculably influential. Thomas Halyburton defended Owen's final definition of faith.²²⁴ John Wesley appealed to Owen to support his own emphasis on the Holy Spirit's testimony in assurance.²²⁵ Theologians supportive of the "Marrow theology," such as James Hog and Thomas Boston, confessed their debt to Owen's views on assurance.²²⁶ Dutch theologians translated all of Owen's pertinent treatises related to faith.²²⁷

In short, scores of Reformed theologians from Owen's day to ours, have honored him as a theologian among theologians. His doctrine of assurance is but one more proof of his pervasive probing of Christian experience. The beauty of Owen's theology is his accent on the Spirit's work without a loss of biblical and theological grounding. Far from reducing experimental theology to anthropological notes, Owen retained a rich God-centeredness by stressing that Christian experience is always the fruit of the Spirit's efficacious work. As Godfrey Vose noted:

Where doctrine and life meet and fuse in human experience, and the elements of that experience are properly delineated, the result is "*experimental*" theology. In Owen's eyes, no man was a Christian unless he had "the root of the matter" within him; that is, unless he had inwardly appropriated the doctrinal truths he professed. But this did not mean that such theology was merely an elevated form of psychology. The puritan theologian certainly had psychological insights, but in studying the experiential side of doctrine, his emphasis was always Godward: Christian experience was *the experience of God the Holy Spirit* within the arena of the human soul.²²⁸

Throughout his writings, Owen's concern for a vital spirituality, without which "Christianity is plucked up by the roots,"²²⁹ enabled him to present a vital "treatment of the objective-subjective tensions in revelational theology,"²³⁰ particularly in his doctrine of assurance. For Owen, those tensions could only be resolved by preserving both a Christological and a pneumatological emphasis.

Owen's pneumatological concern was also polemical, for he defended a biblical and truly spiritual pneumatology against the polarizing extremes of Socinianism (which rejected experimental pneumatology) and Quakerism (which viewed such pneumatology as a rapturous end in itself). Furthermore, as Andrew Thomson stated:

²²⁴ *The Works of Thomas Halyburton*, ed. Robert Burns (Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1837), p. 567.

²²⁵ Zens, "The Doctrine of Assurance," pp. 41-42.

²²⁶ Lachman, "The Marrow Controversy: An Historical Survey," pp. 126-27.

²²⁷ Van der Haar, *From Abbadie to Young*, pp. 89-94.

²²⁸ Vose, "Profile of a Puritan: John Owen," p. 153.

²²⁹ 3:8.

²³⁰ Stover, "The Pneumatology of John Owen," p. 27.

There was a third class of writers at that time, from whom Owen apprehended more danger than either,—men who, in their preaching, dwelt much upon the credentials of the Bible, but little upon its truths,—who would have defended even the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as an article of their creed, and at the same time would have derided all reference to the actual work of divine grace upon a human heart as the “weak imagination of distempered minds.” Much of Owen’s writing has reference to these accommodating and courtly divines, and is, in fact, a vindication of the reality of the spiritual life.²³¹

Within the context of these concerns, it is understandable that Owen’s most important contribution to the doctrine of assurance was the primacy of the Holy Spirit. He viewed the Spirit as intimately involved with each of the three foundations of assurance stipulated by *The Savoy Declaration*: “the blood and righteousness of Christ”; “the inward evidence of . . . graces”; and “the immediate witness of the Spirit.”²³² Although his stress on the Spirit was within an experimental, doctrinal, and Trinitarian framework (witness *Communion with God*), Owen accented the variety of Spirit workings that reinforced the believer’s assurance—whether in sealing, anointing, comforting, pronouncement of justification, earnest of inheritance, confirmation of adoption, persevering grace, gift of recalling and waiting on grace, direct or reflex acts of faith initiated within the believer, or immediate Word-applied testimony of full assurance of faith. In every case, Owen shed light on the Spirit’s internal activities. Hence, if Puritanism has been defined as “the feeling of which Protestantism was the argument,”²³³ then in Owen’s theology—particularly so in assurance—“Protestant Puritanism” and “Puritan Protestantism” are permanently interwoven.

²³¹ Thomson, “Life of Dr. Owen,” 1:cxi.

²³² *Savoy* 18.2.

²³³ Thomson, “Life of Dr. Owen,” 1:cxi.