

A Christ-Centered Church

Chapter 16 of *The Christology of John Owen*

Richard Daniels

While the definition of the word “Puritan” remains a matter of some debate, there is no doubt that ecclesiastical issues were close to the heart of every Puritan preacher. Despite the fact that in creed and sermon the doctrine of the church was incessantly expounded in terms of the covenant and of grace and the doctrines of Christ’s threefold office, historians of the period have not paid much attention to the strong Christocentric nature of the Puritan doctrine of the church. A full exposition of John Owen’s ecclesiology is beyond our present purpose, which is merely to demonstrate that Owen’s views of the church’s nature, composition, authority, mission, ministry, and worship have strong and direct ties to Christology.¹

The Nature of the Church

In the writings of John Owen one can find the following definitions of the church. The first is a definition of God’s house, his Zion:

By the church of Christ I understand, primarily, the whole multitude of them who antecedently are chosen of his Father, and given unto him; consequently, are redeemed, called, and justified in his blood;—the church which he loved, and gave himself for, ‘that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word; that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy, and without blemish,’ Eph. v. 26, 27. And, secondarily, also every holy assembly of mount Zion, whereunto the Lord Christ is made beauty and glory,—every particular church of his saints, inasmuch as they partake of the nature of the whole being purchased by his blood, Acts xx. 28. (8:286)

The second definition is in his *Inquiry of Evangelical Churches*:

The name of the church under the New Testament is capable of a threefold application . . . (1.) For the catholic invisible church, or society of elect believers in the whole world, really related by faith in him unto the Lord Jesus Christ as their mystical head; (2.) for the whole number of visible professors in the whole world, who, by baptism, and the outward profession of the gospel, and obedience unto Christ, are distinguished from the rest of the world: and,—(3.) For such a state as wherein the worship of God is to be celebrated in the way and manner by him appointed, and which is to be ruled by the power which he gives it, and according to the discipline which he hath ordained. (15:233)

¹ In addition to the references cited in this chapter, see the following pages: Vol. 8:20, 28, 38-39, 95-96, 283-309, 560-63; Vol. 9: 53-84, 271-95, 307-20, 431-62; Vol. 13:112-13, 123, 126-27, 137, 179, 246; Vol. 15:7, 8, 10-12, 44-46, 58-59, 73-106, 109, 119, 121, 143-44, 164-65, 179, 212-22, 227-49, 251-61, 302, 328-32, 339-40, 343, 473, 478-79, 481, 490-530; Vol. 16:14-16, 20, 24, 26-33, 36, 49-53, 85, 87, 90, 133-35, 190; Vol. 20:30, 329-31, 542-46; Vol. 21:235, 551, 570-71, 584-85; Vol. 22:149, 172.

From these two definitions it is apparent that the church, whether invisible or visible, universal or particular, derives its nature and existence from its relation to Christ. The elect, who as yet are uncalled are the church in the purpose of God, for they are the object of the redemptive acts of Christ, but they are not properly and practically called the church until they are called and sanctified unto God from the world by the Spirit. This sanctification is into union with Christ in visible, particular churches, or “holy assemblies.” It is vitally important to remember that the word “church” is used both for the body of true believers and for the society of professors and practitioners and their children. Though the two are not identical, Christ is related to the church in each case.

The church exists in visible structured societies, and must do so, since man was created to act in society, and the “principle end” of living in society is the glory and worship of God. To create a holy worshipping society, God revealed his will to Adam in innocence, and, after the fall, with a specific view toward the coming of Christ, to Adam’s descendants. Owen often calls such a society a “church-state” to signify all the various ecclesiastical structures since creation: households of patriarchs, the nation which covenanted together at Sinai, and the particular local church of the New Testament era (a “gospel,” or “evangelical, church-state”). By any definition, it centers on Christ.

The Church’s Lord

With characteristic precision, Owen emphasizes that the origin of the “evangelical church-state” is “directly, immediately, and solely” Jesus Christ (15:234). “Christ alone,” Owen says, “is the author, institutor, and appointer, in a way of authority and legislation, of the gospel church-state, its order, rule, and worship, with all things constantly and perpetually belonging thereunto, or necessary to be observed therein” (15:244; cf. 15:232-33). Visible, particular churches are “the ordinance and institution of Christ” (15:22).

Christ: Author of the “Gospel church-state”

From principles we have observed in previous chapters, Owen supplies three reasons why Christ is “meet” to be the author of the “gospel church-state.” The first is Christ’s threefold “right and title to dispose of all men, in all their spiritual and eternal concernments” (15:235), which right he has by the 1) “*donation* from the Father,” 2) “by virtue of purchase,” and 3) “by *right of conquest*.” This conquest was both over his enemies (who had held his church captive), and over his church, who were enemies to him in their minds and needing to be conquered “by his word, his Spirit, and his grace” (15:235-36).

Secondly, along with right and title to the persons of the church, Christ also has authority with respect to rules, etc., established for the church’s privileges and duty. This authority, is “enclosed unto him, so that no other can have any interest in it,” making him “the only ‘lawgiver’ of the church” (15:237). This authority is “immediately” from Christ, and delegated to the apostles: “For as he took it on himself as his own work to build his church, and that upon himself as its foundation, so he employed his apostles to act under him and from him, in the carrying on that work unto perfection” (15:234). The apostles “received revelations of what did belong unto this church-state, and what was to be prescribed therein.” Owen emphasized that although the apostles did advise and exercise authority, they never attempted to “invent, contrive, institute, or appoint any thing in the church and its state, which they had not by immediate revelation from Christ,” whose authority “acted in them and by them” in the church (15:234).

When they had no immediate revelation from Christ they ruled “only by a due application unto present occasions” of the revelation they had received (15:235). Further, as apostles, “Christ sent them, as his Father sent him; and he was so sent of the Father as that he did ‘stand and feed in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God,’ Mic. v. 4. So did they feed the sheep of Christ in his strength, and in the authority of his name” (15:235). It will soon become apparent how this principle has a special significance for the Puritan pastor.

Thirdly, to his understanding of the church, Owen makes application of the *faithfulness* of Christ. Christ, as mediator, has been given power over the church by the Father:

Hence, it follows, that in the execution of it he hath respect unto the mind and will of God, as unto what he would have done and ordered, with respect whereunto this power was committed unto him. And here his faithfulness takes place, exerted in the revelation of the whole mind of God in this matter, instituting, appointing, and commanding all that God would have so ordained, and nothing else. And what can *any man do that cometh after the King?* (15:242)

The Church’s Life, Glory, and Stability

We may obtain a good view of Owen’s thoughts concerning the relation of Christ and the church by looking at his exposition of the principal scriptural images of the church as Christ’s building, body, and bride.

The Son Over His House

The building motif is explained at length in a sermon entitled “The Branch of the Lord the Beauty of Zion: or, The Glory of the Church in its Relation Unto Christ.” Owen identifies the architects and builders as principally the Spirit, and secondarily and instrumentally the prophets and apostles.

The house is a living house. “Christ, the foundation, is a living stone, and they that are built upon him are living stones. Hence they are said to grow together into a house” (8:288). It is a strong house because of the foundation which as a living rock is “continually communicating strength unto every stone in the building, that it may be enabled to abide in him” (8:289). It is a glorious house: “glorious in respect of inward glory, brought unto it of God in the face of Jesus Christ, being beautiful through the comeliness that he puts upon it,” i.e., by the justification and sanctification of its members who, “partaking of His nature, are very glorious therein” (8:289). The incarnation brings glory to the church: “he being ‘the branch of the Lord and fruit of the earth,’ is made beauty and glory, excellency and comeliness, thereunto, Isa. iv. 2” (8:289). It is also glorious in respect of its “outward structure,” that is, in the “peculiar assemblies thereof”—local churches where the administration of Christ’s glorious ordinances are carried out. “The glory of the ordinances of the gospel is their vigor and purity. There is nothing so glorious as our King on his throne, Christ in his court, this house reigning in the administration of his ordinances” (8:290). The great significance of this for Puritan ecclesiology will appear in the discussion of Owen’s doctrine of worship. Thirdly, “it is glorious in respect of the exaltation it hath above and the triumph over all its opposers” (8:290).

The members of the church comprise a spiritual temple. Jesus Christ stands in a twofold relation unto this temple: 1) in respect of its “fabric and building,” and 2) in respect of its state and condition. Explaining its “fabric and building,” Owen says that Christ is its foundation, its ark, its altar, and its candlestick.

The Church's Foundation

Christ is its foundation, “the foundation of the apostles and prophets,” which they laid by their preaching of the gospel (8:291, 286-87). Three things required to a foundation are “eminently seen in the Lord Christ, in reference to this house”: it must be “first laid,” it is “hidden,” and it “bears up the entire weight of the building.”

How was he “first laid”? Christ was the first laid in the purpose of God: “God purposing to build his elect into a holy temple, purposed that Jesus Christ should be the foundation” (8:291-93). He was first in respect of outward manifestation: in the first gospel of Genesis 3:15, “God first manifests and declares him, before he laid one stone in this building” (8:292). Further, “in the order of nature, Christ must be first laid in the heart of every individual stone before they are laid up in this building.” He is first “in respect of every particular assembly and little sanctuary of mount Zion”: as every congregational minister knew, men must first give themselves up to Christ in faith before they give themselves up to one another in a church covenant. Otherwise, such churches would “prove pinnacles of Babel, not towers of Zion” (8:292).

The foundation that holds up the building is also hidden from view. The significance of this fact in mid-seventeenth-century England had not always been apparent to Owen, as he explains:

Men looking upon the church do find that it is a fair fabric indeed, but cannot imagine how it should stand. A few supporters it seemeth to have in the world, like crouching antics under the windows, that make some show of under-propping it:—here you have a magistrate, there an army, or so. Think the men of the world, “Can we but remove these props, the whole would quickly topple to the ground.” Yes, so foolish have I been myself, and so void of understanding before the Lord, as to take a view of some goodly appearing props of this building, and to think, How shall the house be preserved if these should be removed?... when, lo! suddenly some have been manifested to be pargeted posts, and the very best to be held up by the house, and not to hold it up. On this account the men of the world think it no great matter to demolish the spiritual church of Christ to the ground:—they encourage one another to the work, never thinking of the foundation that lies hidden, against which they dash themselves all to pieces. I say, then, Christ, as the foundation of this house, is hidden to the men of the world,—they see it not, they believe it not. There is nothing more remote from their apprehension than that Christ should be at the bottom of them and their ways, whom they so much despise. (8:292-93)

Owen goes on to describe the relation of Christ to the church in terms of this building’s furniture.

The Furniture of the Temple

Christ is the ark of the house of God, containing “in himself the new covenant; it is made with him originally, established in him irreversibly, —made out through him in all the grace of it faithfully” (8:294). He is also its altar. In fact, Christ is two altars: the altar of sacrifice, and the altar of incense (8:294), signifying Christ’s atonement and intercession. In this context Owen reminds us that all the living stones of this house are priests to offer sacrifice on these altars. That is, by him, as priests, they may draw near to the holy place, where they have a share and

participation in all the sacrifices that are offered upon or by him (8:295). Christ is the candlestick. Drawing upon Zechariah's description of the candlestick, Owen says that Christ alone, "is this candlestick, and all the light which this house hath it is from him" (8:295). The candlestick gives light to the house in two ways: by "doctrinal revelation" and by "real communication," which were described above under the work of Christ as prophet.

Owner

Owen adds five ways in which Christ relates to the house's "state and condition": He is its owner, builder, watchman, "inhabiter," and avenger. Christ is the owner, by right of inheritance, purchase, and conquest. With respect to Christ's purchase of the church, Owen offers us another biblical nuance to his doctrine of the atonement as a price:

When he should come to take possession of this house, he finds that it is mortgaged, and that a great debt lies upon it; which he must pay to the utmost farthing, if he ever intend to have it... Jesus Christ being the heir, the right of redemption belonged unto him. It was not for his honour that it should lie unredeemed. Full well he knew that if he did not, the whole creation was too beggarly to make this purchase. . . . He likes the house, and will have it to dwell in, whatever it cost him. "Here," saith he, "shall be my habitation, and my dwelling for ever," Ps. cxxxii. "Know ye not," saith the apostle, "that ye are the temple of the Spirit of Christ?" Well, and how come we so to be? "Ye are bought with a price," 1 Cor. vi. 19 (8:297-98).²

Christ's third title to the house is his conquest: "An unjust usurper had taken possession of this house, and kept it in bondage;—Satan had seized on it, and brought it, through the wrath of God, under his power" (8:298). As we saw earlier, Christ's victory over Satan has its cosmic and personal dimensions. In this context, Owen combines them thus:

Christ bound the strong man, and then spoiled his goods, Matt. xii. 29. All that darkness, unbelief, sin, and hardness, that he had stuffed this house withal, Christ spoils and scatters them all away. And to make his conquest complete, he triumphs over his enemy, and like a mighty conqueror, makes an open show of him, to his everlasting shame, Col. ii. 15,... and by this means strengthens his title to his inheritance. (8:298)

To these three reasons for ownership, Owen adds that it is his house by the "donation of his Father," and by the "actual possession he takes of it by his Spirit" (8:299).

Builder

Secondly, this "mystical habitation" of God is *built* by Jesus Christ. This is one principal aspect of the glory of Christ that which sets him above Moses as an authority in the church (see Owen's exegesis of Hebrews 3:5 in the commentary). As described in *The Branch of the Lord*, there is a "twofold building:... Spiritual, of all the stones thereof into one mystical house," and "ecclesiastical, of some particular stones into several tabernacles" (8:300).

² See Edward Reynolds', *The Lord's Property in His Redeemed People* (1679, 1009-1018).

Three distinct operations required in Christ's building of the house of God were typified in the building of the tabernacle. The first of these is the "giving out the design, platform, and pattern of it, in its laws, ordinances, and institutions, that it may answer the end whereunto it is designed" (20:542). Owen's sense of redemptive history is evident in his description of how, before the foundation of the world and in each successive operation in history, the Son of God is the principal agent. His remarks, not unique, demonstrate the way the doctrine of the covenant of redemption came to expression in popular exposition.

The first thing required unto it may be considered two ways:— First as to the delineation or forming of this house in his own eternal mind, as the Son and Wisdom of the Father. He was in the eternal counsels of the Father about the providing and framing of this habitation for himself. God from all eternity had laid the plot and design of this great fabric and all the concernments of it in the idea of his own mind. And there it was hid, even from all the angels in heaven, until its actual rearing, until the event, Eph. iii. 9-11. This design and purpose of his "he purposed in Christ Jesus;" that is, this counsel of God, even of Father and Son, Prov. viii. 31, 32, was to be accomplished in and by him. And this glorious pattern he had in his mind in all ages, and brought with him into the world when he came to put the last hand unto it. This answered the...idea represented to Moses in the mount. He expressed this conception of his mind, when he gave out laws, rules, orders, ordinances, institutions of worship, the whole pattern of the house, as it was in divers manners and at sundry seasons to be erected. (20:543-4)

As the church was one in all ages, so it had one builder, through whom all of God's dealings with man have taken place. Owen is not troubled by the problem raised by modern dispensationalists over Matthew 16:18 ("Upon this rock," i.e., the rock of faith in his person and work, "I will build my church"). He acknowledges, "the principal instance of this work is in the church of the New Testament, whose foundation in himself and erection on himself he did so expressly and particularly undertake" (20:543). There is no contradiction between this and a unity with the God's Old Testament congregation.

The second operation performed by Christ is the "preparing and fitting of the materials of it," "framing" and "compacting of them together, that they may grow up unto a house" (20:542, 544). Christ accomplishes the first of these through his "giving life unto dead stones; or rather, being life unto them" (8:300). Neither free will nor the strictest religious practice can fit a person for this building: "If the most skillful workmen in the world should go to the pit of nature, by their own strength to hew out stones for this building, they will never, with all their skill and diligence, lay one stone upon it" (8:300-301; 293). Therefore, in a sermon devoted to ecclesiology, Owen counsels the sinner,

Lay thyself before the Lord Jesus; say to him that thou art in thyself altogether unfit for the great building he hath in hand;—that thou hast often attempted to put thyself upon it, but all in vain:—"Now, Lord Jesus, do thou take me into thine own hand. If thou castest me away, I cannot complain,—I must justify thee in all thy ways; but thou callest things that are not as though they were,—thou turnest dead stones into children of Abraham: oh, turn my dead into a living stone!" Fear not; he will in no wise cast thee out. (8:302)

These stones have communion with one another in being placed into particular assemblies, in which Christ's "directions" for the building must be strictly observed. For instance, in comparison with the free-will offerings which went into the building of the tabernacle (Ex. 35:4-5), Christ "invites none, receives none, admits of none, but those that willingly offer themselves": those who have been made "willing in the day of his power," willingly "give up themselves to the Lord, and to the officers of his house" (20:544-45).

The construction of the tabernacle by Bezaleel and Aholiab, Owen reminds us, was a work of "art, wisdom, and skill. But the fashioning of the real spiritual house of God by Christ in all ages is a thing full of mysterious wisdom and holiness" (20:545). At this point the metaphors of building and body become mixed (as they do in Scripture, which speaks of "living stones" and a body "edifying itself in love"), but, as Owen observes,

The sum is, that in Christ, the head of this body, the lord and builder of this house, there is resident a Spirit of life, which by him is communicated to every stone of the house, which gives it life, usefulness, union unto the head or lord of the body or house, as also order and beauty in reference unto the whole; that is, being all alike united unto Christ, and acted in their places and order by one Spirit, they become one house unto God. (20:545; cf. 8:287, 288; 13:246)

Owen describes the uniting of these materials as twofold—first, physical and living; secondly, legal or moral.

The former is, as was said, by the communication of the same Spirit of life unto them all which is in Christ their head, so that they are all animated and acted by the same Spirit. The latter is their regular disposition into beautifully-ordered societies, according to the rules and laws of the gospel. (20:545-46)

Each individual stone is built upon him: every promise made unto the church, such as "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," is made unto each believer (13:126, 246).

Indweller

Thirdly, Christ is the indweller of this house, as typified by the "solemn entrance of the presence of God" into the tabernacle "for its appropriation, dedication, and sanctification unto God" (20:542). Christ indwells the house in three ways: by His Spirit, by His graces, and by His ordinances. In stark contrast to the absent Christ of medieval sacramental thought (Dorner, 1880, 271), Owen joins the Reformers in asserting that Jesus Christ

doth not build temples merely for graces, created graces; he dwells in them himself,—he dwells in them by his Spirit. And this is a glorious privilege of this house, that Jesus Christ in a mystical and wonderful manner should dwell in it, and every stone of it. Hereby all believers come to be not one personal, but one mystical Christ, 1 Cor. xii. 12. However we are distanced in respect of his human nature, yet mystically we are one,—one body, one mystical Christ, because we have one Spirit dwelling in us and him. (8:304)

While insisting that Christ does not build these temples merely for graces, Owen adds that the Lord indeed also dwells in them by his graces, which are the “ornaments of the living stones of this house, to make them meet and fit for such an indweller as the Lord Christ” (8:305). The “great ornaments of his kingly court,” however, are his ordinances, by which “he is glorious in all the assemblies of mount Zion” (8:305). This is the way in which the saints hold communion with Christ (8:305-308).

The Church’s Keeper

Christ is the guarantor of the continuance of the gospel church-state, despite certain changes which have occurred in its “outward form and order” from the time of the apostles (15:247-48; 251-61; 15:327-34). The apostolic church was administered by those distinguished from all others by an *immediate* call from Christ, by “extraordinary gifts and power,” by “divine inspiration and infallible guidance,” and with an “extensive commission, giving them power towards all the world for their conversion, and over all churches for their edification” (15:249). The officers which succeeded the apostles (to the present) are no less appointed to their offices by Christ, mediately to be sure, but by means appointed by Him. Christ is the “great watchman, or keeper of this house,” who continually watches over it, to see to its every want and guard it from “the son of violence” (8:302-303). Further, he is “the great avenger of this house, and of all the injuries or wrongs that are done unto it,” who “fearfully broke the old Roman-pagan empire,” for their persecution of the church, “and will as fearfully destroy the antichristian Roman power [i.e., the papacy] with all its adherents” (8:308).

Owen gives five reasons for the perpetuity of the church. First, “the supreme cause hereof is the Father’s grant of a *perpetual* kingdom in this world unto Jesus Christ, the mediator and head of the church” (15:251). This includes the grant of the “*real subjects*” of that kingdom to Christ, a grant that insures that in every age Christ would have “a multitude, that are the true, real, spiritual subjects of his kingdom” (15:251). It also included a grant of “*outward visible profession*, of subjection and obedience unto him, and the observation of his laws,” with the effect that “the world and the worst of men therein were to see and know that he hath still a kingdom and multitude of subjects depending on his rule” (15:252). Very significantly, the gathering of particular churches is, likewise, a part of the grant by the Father to the Son, for in them the purposes of the gospel are accomplished (15:252-53). Second, “the continuation of this church-state depends on the promise of Christ himself to preserve and continue it.” Thus, Owen reasons, “If the gates of hell do prevail either against the faith of sincere believers, or the catholic profession of that faith, or the expression of that profession in the duties and ordinances to be observed in particular churches, the promise fails and is of no effect” (15:254). Third, the continuation of the gospel church “depends on the word or law of Christ, which gives right and title unto all believers to congregate themselves in such a church state” (15:254). By this Owen emphasizes that Christians have no need of any authority beyond the word of Christ for the gathering of gospel churches; nor, acting upon his authority, will they lack the presence of Christ, “which brings along with it all church power and privileges” (15:254-55). Fourth, Christ has assumed the responsibility of communicating spiritual gifts unto the church, “for the work of the ministry,” unto the end of the world. Finally, Christ has by his Spirit and grace implanted into believers a “due sense of their duty,” and an “instinct...to associate themselves in holy communion, for the joint and mutual exercise of those graces of the Spirit, which are the same, as unto the essence of them, in them all” (15:256).

The Head of the Body

Many similar points might be made regarding the head-body image.³ Owen emphasizes that Christ is the “only” head of the church (20:329). This holds true not only for the entire church, “but also unto every individual believer in the church, . . . and that in both those senses wherein he is a head,—that is, according to the natural and metaphorical use of the word” (20:329-30). First, he is its natural head (13:127). As such he is “the only head of vital influence to the whole church and every member thereof,” the source of its life and grace, “for the enlivening strengthening, acting, guiding, and directing,” of every believer (20:30). Metaphorically, Christ is the “only head of rule and government unto the whole church and every member thereof” (20:30).⁴ Owen urges this against the Episcopal as well as the Roman hierarchy. Submission to church officers is due not upon the authority of the church, but upon that of Christ. Moreover, Christ is “our immediate head.” With regard to church officers and ordinances Owen says,

these belong only unto the way of our dependence, and hinder not but that our dependence is immediate on himself, he being the immediate object of our faith and love. The soul of a believer rests not in any of these things, but only makes use of them to confirm his faith in subjection unto Christ: for all these things are ours, they are appointed for our use, and we are Christ’s as he is God’s, 1 Cor. iii. 21-23. (20:331)

A Christ-Centered Worship

It is a popular misunderstanding of the simplicity of Puritan worship that it was motivated primarily by a rejection of Romanism. The rejection of the “popish ceremonies” of Rome, however, was motivated by an earnest desire to keep the second commandment, i.e., the “regulative principle” that nothing ought to be done in worship except what stands upon God’s revealed will. To introduce forms or ceremonies of human invention is idolatrous. In Owen’s exposition, however, not only does the regulative principle have a Christological foundation, but the recognition of this foundation involves much more than the external purification of the church of Roman and Anglican ceremonies.

Owen distinguishes the worship of God into that which is “natural or moral,” arising from man’s natural relationship to God his creator, and that which is “external,” directed by God’s express commandment (15:8-9; 15:447-50). These are not two types of worship, each acceptable to God; rather, man’s natural relationship to God requires that we worship him according to the manner of his appointment. The substitution of other forms of worship is a violation rather than an acknowledgement of that relation. This is the basic message of the second commandment. This commandment, however, as Owen makes clear, is quite Christocentric in nature. Owen says,

whereas, ever since the entrance of sin into the world, God had always respect unto the promise of the Lord Christ and his mediation, in whom alone he will be glorified, and faith in whom he aimed to begin and increase in all his worship, he

³ See Manton (1870, 1:453-63)

⁴ Owen’s use of “head” as “source” is based upon such Scripture texts as Ephesians 4:16 and Colossians 2:19. It is obvious from the remainder of his discussion that Owen does not see any contradiction between head as source of life and head as authority (cf. Grudem 1991, p. 434).

hath suited his institutions of the means thereof to that dispensation of light and knowledge of him which he was pleased at any time to grant. Thus, immediately after the giving of the *promise*, he appointed *sacrifices* for the great means of his worship; as to glorify himself expressly by men's offering unto him of the principal good things which he had given them, so to instruct them in the faith, and confirm them in the expectation of the *great sacrifice* for sin that was to be offered by the promised seed,... Hereunto he nextly added *circumcision*, as an *express sign of the covenant, with the grace of it, which he called Abraham* and his seed unto by Jesus Christ,... And to the same general end and purpose he afterwards superadded the *passover*, with its attendant institutions, Exod. xii. 3-24; and then the whole law of institutions contained in ordinances,... So by sundry degrees he built up that fabric of his outward worship, which was suited, in his infinite wisdom, unto his own glory and the edification of his church, until the.... coming of Christ in the flesh, and the work of his mediation. (15:451)

God, who "reserved unto himself the sovereign power of altering, changing or utterly abolishing" any part of his instituted worship, forbade man to do so, but has done so by Christ, "the Lord over his whole house," with the institution of the new covenant and its attendant forms of worship.

Old Testament worship was glorious. The heart of the issue between Anglican and Puritan was, how has the coming of Christ made New Testament worship yet more glorious. Owen's answer is to be found in several treatises, including two sermons on *The Nature and Beauty of Gospel Worship* (9:53-84). Owen opens the first of these by saying that, by his death Christ has fulfilled, and so abolished, the ceremonial law, and the curse of the moral law. Previously, Gentiles had been totally separated from God, and the Jews had "no immediate admission" to God; it was only through the priests, only from a distance, and only through elaborate and burdensome ceremonies, "outward and carnal ordinances, which were mere shadows of what was to come" (9:53-61). Now, through the most costly blood of Christ, through the new and living way which is his flesh, having this glorious ministering high priest, Jews and Gentiles are admitted to the true holy of holies; they have access, they *draw near*, "with reverent boldness," to God their Father (9:61-69). They have this "by the Holy Spirit," enabling them to hear Christ's word, enabling them to approach God "in a spiritual manner, to pray with grace in their hearts," working in them "faith, love, delight, fervency, watchfulness, perseverance," so that they enjoy a "heavenly intercourse" with God (9:69-73). Furthermore, as this worship is performed in the Spirit, so it is, Owen argues, "*in one Spirit*," which constitutes the only true uniformity (9:76). Gospel worship, Owen concludes, "may well be reckoned among the unspeakable privileges that are purchased for us by the blood of Christ" (9:84).

The principal objectives in the institutions of gospel worship are that we 1) "sanctify the name of God," 2) "own and avow our professed subjection to the Lord Jesus Christ," 3) "build up ourselves in our most holy faith," and 4) "testify and confirm our mutual love" (15:455). Each of these (not only the second) has a Christocentric character, as Owen expounds them (15:456-62).

The "due observation of instituted worship" is required of men for the "*honour* of God in this world, the *trial* of our faith and obedience, the *order* and beauty of the church, the *exaltation* of Christ in our professed subjection to him, and the *saving* of our souls in the ways of his appointment" (15:471-72). In each of these areas, Owen emphasizes, the worship of God is

ordered with respect to Christ. Consequently, no worship not centered upon Christ can be acceptable to God or good for the souls of men (15:471-76). Moreover, the apostasy of the church “consists principally in false worship and a departure from the institutions of Christ” (15:476).

This is crucial for Owen: all legitimate forms of worship were instituted by Christ. All of these forms, even those which are “founded in the law of nature,” are “to be observed principally on the authority of Jesus Christ” (15:478). Owen’s reason for this is reminiscent of his description of the formal reason of our faith in God.

The principal thing we are to aim at, in the whole worship of God, is the discharge of that duty which we owe to Jesus Christ, the king and head of the church:... This we cannot do unless we consider his authority as the formal reason and cause of our observance of all that we do therein; for that he hath annexed unto our doing and observing whatever he hath commanded, and that because he hath commanded us: Matt. xxviii. (15:478)

One of the most important differences between Owen and the Anglican establishment with regard to worship was over its “beauty.” The advocates of the Anglican forms emphasized what they called the “beauty of holiness”; by which they meant what would more appropriately be called “the holiness of beauty.” That is, the rites and ceremonies of Anglicanism were appropriate, good, and “*holy*” because of their appearance. Owen, by contrast, viewed the simple institutions of gospel worship as *beautiful because they were “holy,”* instituted by God himself as the most appropriate way for believers to “behold the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus.”

Owen’s emphasis upon this transforming vision of Christ is so great as to require us to regard it not as one of several reasons given to justify a pre-conceived Puritan position, but as one of Owen’s most deeply held convictions concerning the gospel, a conviction based upon his understanding of the history of redemption, and all that it means in terms of God’s full manifestation of himself in Christ. Any man-made form, no matter how beautiful, no matter what its reputation for illustrating the glory of Christ, dishonored Christ by inevitably obscuring his true glory. This glory could not be represented with man’s arts, but could only be known through the word of the gospel.⁵

Referring to religious rites he argues that the “comeliness and beauty of gospel worship doth not in the least depend upon them nor their observation” (15:468). The most glorious rites were enjoyed by the Old Testament church; yet, as Paul vigorously argues in 2 Corinthians 3:7-11, the worship of the New Testament, “for beauty, glory, and comeliness,” is far advanced above that of the Old (15:468-69). From Hebrews 10:19-21, Owen argues that the glory of the New consists “in its relation to God in Christ, with the liberty and boldness of the worshippers to enter into the holy place, unto the throne of grace, under the ministry of their merciful and faithful high priest, being enabled thereunto by the Spirit of adoption and supplications” (15:469). Making an application of this that is typical for Owen, he concludes,

This is the glory of gospel worship and the beauty of it; whose consideration whilst the minds of men are diverted from, to look for beauty in the outward preparation of ceremonies, they lose the privilege purchased for believers by the

⁵ See John LaShell (1985, 178-214) for a discussion of this feature of Puritan thought

blood of Christ. Instead, then, of furthering the beauty and comeliness of gospel worship, they are apt to lead men into a dangerous error and mistake,—namely, that the beauty and excellency of it consists in such things as, upon a due consideration, will appear to be mean and carnal, and far beneath those ceremonies and ordinances of the Old Testament, which yet, in comparison of the worship of the gospel, are called “worldly, carnal, beggarly,” and are said to have “no glory.” (15:469)

In his most severe critique of the Roman church, Owen focuses upon this feature of their worship. The religion of Rome, he says, “is nothing but a dead image of the gospel, erected in the loss of an experience of its spiritual power, overthrowing its use, with all its ends, being suited to the taste of men, carnal, ignorant, and superstitious” (8:551). The reason for this is that, in the place of the “representation made of Christ and his glory in the gospel,” by which “believers have an experience of the power and efficacy of the divine truth contained therein,” the Romanists have substituted the “making of *images of him* of wood and stone, or gold and silver, or painting on them” (8:552). Owen says he is not concerned in this treatise with their being the objects of *adoration*, but as they are the way of *representation*, or as he puts it, “set up in the room of the gospel, and for the ends of it, as means of teaching and instruction” (8:553).

This Christological emphasis has been generally over-looked by historians of Puritanism, who focus upon the second commandment as the foundation for the regulative principle in worship but fail to observe the theological basis for the commandment, a foundation well known and important to the Puritans. With Owen it is precisely the new covenantal character of gospel worship, with its doctrine of the presence of Christ filling the temple that makes the addition of artificial means of glory so offensive. “Let men think as meanly as they please of the spiritual worship of God amongst his people, all glory that ever yet appeared in the world was but a bubble to it,—all that God ever instituted before came exceedingly short of it” (8:290).

The Pastoral Ministry

“The Lord Jesus Christ hath faithfully promised to be present with his church unto the end of the world.” This presence of Christ is by the Spirit, and is “secured by an everlasting, unchangeable covenant.” The great end for which the Spirit is promised is the continuation and preservation of the church, and its conformity unto Jesus Christ. By what means does Christ work by His Spirit to accomplish this great end? The principal means, according to Owen, is the pastoral ministry. Owen’s understanding of the office, calling, and work of the church’s pastors is also firmly built upon his Christology. The importance of the ministry may be observed in a number of Owenian treatises, most notably his *Discourse of Spiritual Gifts*, and two sermons: “The Ministry a Gift of Christ” and “Ministerial Endowments the Work of the Spirit.”

As the resurrection of Christ inaugurated a new order of worship, with the replacement of type and carnal ceremonies with the spiritual enjoyment of divine realities, so a new kind of ministry was needed, and a new kind of ministry was supplied:

He that enabled the shoulders of the Levites to bear the ark of old, and their arms to slay the sacrifices, without which natural strength those carnal ordinances could not have been observed..., hath, upon their removal and the institution of the spiritual worship of the gospel, undertaken to supply the administrators of it with spiritual strength and abilities for the discharge of their work. (15:11)

This is the purpose of the gifts of the Spirit. Within this context of spiritual gifts, Owen asserts there is “a gift of Christ which is the foundation and subject of them,” namely, the pastoral ministry (4:486). He bases this emphasis on Paul’s exposition of the institution of the New Testament ministry in Ephesians 4:7-16. This gift, Owen observes, in both the office per se, and also in “the persons to discharge it, is an eminent, most useful fruit and effect of the mediatory power of Christ,” and “the great fundamental of all church order, power, and worship” (4:487, emphasis mine). The eminence of this gift of ministry is evident from the “grandeur of its introduction” in the exaltation of Christ, and its “original acquisition in the humiliation of Christ” (4:487-88). Owen concludes, the ministry “is a fruit whose root is in the grave of Christ” (4:490; cf., 9:441). Its object is “the body of Christ himself, and its end, the edification of this body, or its increase in faith and obedience, in all the graces and gifts of the Spirit, until it come unto conformity unto him and the enjoyment of him. And a ministry which hath not this object and end is not of the giving or grant of Christ” (4:497).

The officers of the church are instituted by Christ (15:490-530). This fact determines the nature of their offices, their functions, and their character qualifications. Thus, “The especial design of the rule of the church in its government is, to represent the holiness, love, compassion, care, and authority of Christ towards his church” (16:135). Church-rule is a due care and provision that the institutions, laws, commands, and appointments of Jesus Christ be duly observed, and nothing else (16:135). It is enlightening to read Owen’s ecclesiastical treatises with these responsibilities in mind. Churches are the schools of Christ for the perfecting of disciples (21:770-71). In the training of disciples, for instance, Owen argues that ministers must teach even the most abstruse and difficult truths of the mysteries of the gospel for the edification of the church (21:551).

The gift of the ministry consists of gifts for the ministry. Christ gives ministers to the church by appointing first the office, then distributing the requisite spiritual gifts to men to enable them to discharge the office, then by giving power to the church to call and separate these gifted individuals to the work. No church, by ordaining a man, can give him a gift and authority which Christ has not given him. Thus, ordination is not a means of conveying authority from Christ to men, but the local church’s acknowledging it in those already possessing it by virtue of Christ’s call (4:492-96). It is a fundamental principle of his “congregational” ecclesiology, however, that the Spirit-gifted pastoral ministry (including teaching and ruling elders and the distinct office of “teacher”), as it is the *only* means appointed by Christ, *must be sufficient* for Christ’s end of the perfecting of the church. Furthermore, as it is the solemn responsibility of those so gifted to exercise those gifts, it is Christ’s command to the church to “set such, in his name and strength, in the way and unto the work that he hath allotted to them” (15:12).

Qualifications and Call to Ministry

This call to the office of pastor, Owen reminds us, must be “according to the mind of Christ.” This is because it was Christ who “in his own person and by his own authority, was the author of this office;” who “appointed” it “to abide in the church unto the consummation of all things;” and to bear the “whole weight of the order rule, and edification of his church” (16:51). Even in his treatment of the qualifications of the minister, Owen’s eye is on Christ, the “great example and pattern.” Owen put it bluntly:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, being the good Shepherd, whose the sheep are, the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, the chief Shepherd, did design, in the undertaking and exercise of his pastoral office, to give a type and example unto all those who are to be called unto the same office under him; and if there be not a conformity unto him herein, no man can assure his own conscience or the church of God that he is or can be lawfully called unto this office. (16:49)

Nor is it only in these introductory comments that Owen emphasizes the example of Christ. Each particular qualification is built upon some pastoral virtue of the chief Shepherd: “*furniture with spiritual gifts and abilities* by communication of the Holy Ghost”; “*compassion and love to the flock*”; “*a continual watchfulness over the whole flock*, to keep it, to preserve it, to feed, to lead, and cherish it, to purify and cleanse it, until it be presented unspotted unto God”; “*zeal for the glory of God*”; and conformity to Christ in, and “*some degree of eminency above others*,” in being “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (16:49-51). In addition, they must, like Christ in heaven, have a sense of the infirmities of his flock, and “endeavor in an especial manner to succor them that are tempted” (16:85).

Elsewhere, Owen identifies three things that are necessary for the recognition of someone as “a gift given by Christ unto the church”: 1) imitation of Christ, 2) representation of Christ, and 3) zeal for Christ. First, the pastor imitates Christ in “meekness, in care, in love, in tenderness towards the whole flock” (9:436-37). Secondly, he represents Christ in his threefold mediatorial office. As king,

in the rule and conduct of the church; that the church, under our rule and conduct, may be sensible that the government of Christ is spiritual and holy. What a woeful presentation of Christ is made by men who undertake to rule the church of God with rods and axes, with fire and fagot! Is this to represent the meek and holy King of the church, or rather a devouring tyrant, unto the world? It is our great work, in what interest Christ hath given us in the rule of the church, to represent him as spiritual, as holy, as meek, — as universally tending to edification, and not to destruction. (9:437)

Principally, the minister represents him in his office as prophet,

“to preach the word in season and out of season;”—by all means to carry on the church in the knowledge of God, and of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” “I will give them ‘pastors that shall feed them with knowledge and understanding.’” Those who take upon themselves to be pastors, and neglect this work of feeding the flock, may, at as cheap a rate, and with equal modesty, renounce Jesus Christ. (9:437)

Furthermore he represents Christ in the “imitable part of his sacerdotal office; which is, to make continual prayers and intercession for the church,—and that church, in particular, whereunto we belong” (9:437). Thirdly, he must have zeal for Christ: “He that comes as an ambassador from Christ, in Christ’s stead, will have zeal for all the concerns of Christ in the church; for his worship, for the purity of his ordinances, for the conversion of souls, and for the building up of the saints” (9:438).

Its origin in the death and resurrection of Christ, its equipment with the Christ-bestowed gift of the Holy Spirit, its “end” in preaching “that peace to mankind which was made by the death of Christ,” and its role in the transformation of saints into Christ’s image make the pastoral office an eminent and glorious gift. Indeed, “There is a greater glory in giving a minister to a poor congregation, than there is in the installment and enthroning of all the popes, and cardinals, and metropolitans, that ever were in the world: let their glory be what it will, Christ is upon his theater of glory in the communication of this office and these officers” (9:439).

The Non-Conformist and Congregationalist

We have seen the basis for Owen’s non-conformity: his conviction that Christ is the sole, ultimate, and immediate authority on the structure, authority, teaching, and worship in the church, the sole and all-sufficient source of the church’s spiritual life and glory. Nothing beyond what Christ gives is needed, anything beyond what Christ warrants is disallowed. Owen was not only a Non-Conformist, however, he was also a Congregationalist. This was because of his conviction that Christ had not only given all that was sufficient to the church, but had given it the local congregation. To fully appreciate the Christocentric nature of Owen’s Congregationalism it would be helpful to consider one more description of the “visible church-state which Christ hath instituted under the New Testament.” He describes its subjects, and the ends of Christ for the church as, an especial society or congregation of professed believers, joined together according unto his mind, with their officers, guides, or rulers, whom he hath appointed, which do or may meet together for the celebration of all the ordinances of divine worship, the professing and authoritatively proposing the doctrine of the gospel, with the exercise of the discipline prescribed by himself, unto their own mutual edification, with the glory of Christ, in the preservation and propagation of his kingdom in the world. (15:262)

“Unto such a church,” a particular congregation of covenanting visible saints, meeting together to observe Christ’s ordinances and keep his commands, with his guides and rulers, “and every one of them,” Owen argues, “belong of right all the privileges, promises, and power that Christ doth give and grant unto the church in this world” (15:262).

Congregational churches “alone,” he concludes, “have a “suitableness and sufficiency unto all the ends for which the Lord Christ appointed such churches” (15:302; cf. 252f, 267-69, 479-86), such as “mutual love among all Christians” (15:302-306), preservation of true doctrine (15:306-308), propagation of the gospel (15:308-309), and evangelical discipline (15:358-59). Owen is persuaded that, since Christ has given both authority and power to the local assembly, all that is biblically necessary for accomplishing the ends of Christ in the world are manageably-sized gathered church of visible saints, under the scriptural leadership of congregationally-called officers. If this is all that is necessary, then it is biblically unwarranted for anyone, even the local assembly itself, to deprive such congregations of the liberty which Christ has given them (15:313-19).

For these ends of Christ, Christians were required to join particular churches. “It is the duty of every one who professeth faith in Christ Jesus, and takes due care of his own eternal salvation, voluntarily and by his own choice to join himself unto some particular congregation of Christ’s institution, for his own spiritual edification, and the right discharge of his commands” (15:320; cf. 15:486-89). Church membership is necessary if believers are to carry out the duties, ordinances, worship, mission, perfection, preservation, and discipline which Christ has commanded (13:176). “It is an obediential act unto the commands of Christ; whereunto is

required subjection of conscience unto his authority, faith in his promises, as also a respect unto an appearance before his judgment-throne at the last day” (15:322).

The requirements for admission into the church reflect the same Christocentric emphasis we have seen throughout Owen’s work. Generally, Owen’s position is this: “We desire no more to constitute church-members, and we can desire no less, than what, in the judgment of charity, may comply with the union that is between Christ the head and the church” (16:20). This will mean a life consistent with a living union with Christ by his Spirit, and a profession of knowledge of Christ, and faith in him. With respect to this latter requirement, Owen says, “They must be such as do make an open profession of the subjection of their souls and consciences unto the authority of Christ in the gospel, and their readiness to yield obedience unto all his commands” (16:14). This will require “a competent knowledge of the doctrines and mystery of the gospel, *especially concerning the person and offices of Christ*” (16:15, emphasis mine; see also 16:24). As he says elsewhere, without knowledge of the mysteries of the gospel, no

privilege of the gospel can be profitably made use of, nor any duty of it rightly performed, so saving light is of the essence of conversion, and doth inseparably accompany it: 2 Corinthians 4:6, “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Where this is wanting, it is impossible for any person to evidence that he is delivered from that blindness, darkness, and ignorance, which all men are under the power of in the state of nature. Such a measure, then, of light and knowledge, as whereby men are enabled to apprehend aright of the person and offices of Christ, of the nature of his meditation, the benefits thereof, and the obedience that he requires at the hands of his disciples, is expected in them who desire to be admitted into the fellowship of the church. (15:526)

It will also require their professed subjection to Christ’s authority, “conviction and confession of sin, with the way of deliverance by Jesus Christ” (16:16). They must also be “willing to give up themselves unto the rule of Christ in the church, and a subjection unto all his ordinances and institutions therein” (16:24; 16:24, 26-33, 36).

In his *Inquiry Concerning Evangelical Churches*, Owen answers the question what kind of particular churches Christ’s disciples ought to join. The first among several disqualifying features is the rejection or corruption of “any fundamental article of faith”; a fundamental error being one against the foundation, such as those of the Socinians (15:335). Rather, it “must be such a church as wherein all the fundamental truths of the gospel are believed, owned, and professed, without controversy, and those not borne withal by whom they are denied or opposed” otherwise “it doth not hold the Head, it is not built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles” (15:339). Secondly, “it must be a church as wherein the divine worship instituted or approved by Christ himself is diligently observed, without any addition made thereunto” (15:340). Thirdly, “it is required that the ministry of a church . . . is not defective in any of those things which, according to the rule of the gospel, are fundamental thereunto” (15:341), including, fourthly, “gospel discipline” (15:343). It is interesting to observe Owen’s insistence upon both the necessity of adherence in fundamental doctrines, ministry, and discipline; and the liberty of judgment in the choice of an edifying church (15:334-44; 16:21-22).

Conclusion

Owen's ecclesiastical treatises and sermons constitute a great portion of his labors in the cause of Christ, much more than this short survey could adequately expound. Nevertheless, the objective of this chapter was to illustrate that Owen's ecclesiology was informed and motivated by his understanding of the relationship between the church and Christ. We have seen the Christological basis for the nature, character, structure, worship, ministry, and life of the church. In the next chapter, we will examine more carefully and on a more particular and personal level what Owen taught concerning the Christian's life.

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Richard Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen*
(Grand Rapids: Reformed Heritage Books, 2004), 450-480.