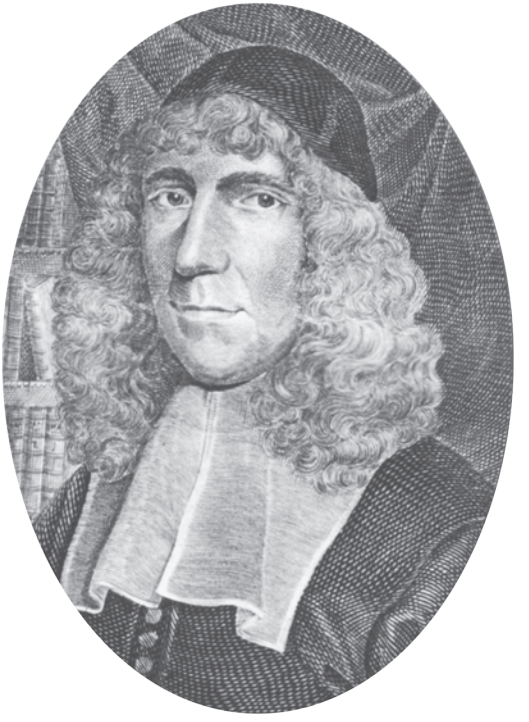
John Owen



John Owen (1616–1683)

"The Foundation of Communion with God"

The Trinitarian Piety of John Owen

Introduced and Edited by
Ryan M. McGraw

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*To **Mark Jones**,*

who taught me how to be a good scholar and
who is a model of what it means to be a pastor/scholar.
Without your prayerful labors, my PhD project
would not have been possible.
Thank you for your work and for your friendship.

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Adam Embry, *"An Honest, Well Experienced Heart": The Piety of John Flavel*

Table of Contents

Section Two: Heavenly-Mindedness and Apostasy

Section Three: Covenant and Church

Profiles in Reformed Spirituality

Charles Dickens's famous line in *A Tale of Two Cities*—"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"—seems well suited to western evangelicalism since the 1960s. On the one hand, these decades have seen much for which to praise God and to rejoice. In His goodness and grace, for instance, Reformed truth is no longer a house under siege. Growing numbers identify themselves theologically with what we hold to be biblical truth, namely, Reformed theology and piety. And yet, as an increasing number of Reformed authors have noted, there are many sectors of the surrounding western evangelicalism that are characterized by great shallowness and a trivialization of the weighty things of God. So much of evangelical worship seems barren. And when it comes to spirituality, there is little evidence of the riches of our heritage as Reformed evangelicals.

As it was at the time of the Reformation, when the watchword was *ad fontes*—"back to the sources"—so it is now: The way forward is backward. We need to go back to the spiritual heritage of Reformed evangelicalism to find the pathway forward. We cannot live in the past; to attempt to do so would be antiquarianism. But our Reformed forebearers in the faith can teach us much about Christianity, its doctrines, its passions, and its fruit.

And they can serve as our role models. As R. C. Sproul has noted of such giants as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards: "These men all were conquered, overwhelmed, and spiritually intoxicated by their vision of the holiness of God. Their minds and imaginations were captured by the majesty of God the Father. Each of them possessed a profound affection for the sweetness and excellence of Christ. There was in each of them a singular and unswerving loyalty to Christ that spoke of a citizenship in heaven that was always more precious to them than the applause of men."[1]

To be sure, we would not dream of placing these men and their writings alongside the Word of God. John Jewel (1522–1571), the Anglican apologist, once stated: "What say we of the fathers, Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Cyprian?… They were learned men, and learned fathers; the instruments of the mercy of God, and vessels full of grace. We despise them not, we read them, we reverence them, and give thanks unto God for them. Yet…we may not make them the foundation and warrant of our conscience: we may not put our trust in them. Our trust is in the name of the Lord."[2]

Seeking, then, both to honor the past and yet not idolize it, we are issuing these books in the series Profiles in Reformed Spirituality. The design is to introduce the spirituality and piety of the Reformed

1. R. C. Sproul, "An Invaluable Heritage," *Tabletalk* 23, no. 10 (October 1999): 5–6.

2. Cited in Barrington R. White, "Why Bother with History?" *Baptist History and Heritage* 4, no. 2 (July 1969): 85.

tradition by presenting descriptions of the lives of notable Christians with select passages from their works. This combination of biographical sketches and collected portions from primary sources gives a taste of the subjects' contributions to our spiritual heritage and some direction as to how the reader can find further edification through their works. It is the hope of the publishers that this series will provide riches for those areas where we are poor and light of day where we are stumbling in the deepening twilight.

—Joel R. Beeke
Michael A. G. Haykin

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Thanks are due, first, to Jay Collier of Reformation Heritage Books for asking me to consider making a popular version of my PhD work on John Owen and to contribute to this wonderful series. Thanks also to Michael Haykin and Joel Beeke for their encouragements, their editorial skill, and their personal godliness. You both combine the skill of a scholar with the warmth of a pastor.

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Thanks to the congregation, session, and deacons of First OPC, Sunnyvale, California, for your friendship and for your prayers for my diverse labors in the kingdom of Christ. A minister can do little without a praying congregation. I am grateful for your fellowship in the Lord and in my labors.

As in all of my projects, my wife, Krista, has continually helped me through her prayers, encouragements, and fellowship in Christ. You truly bless me, my work, and my ministry more than anything else less than God Himself.

It is also my hope that the triune God would bless books such as this one to introduce our boys—Owen, Calvin, and Jonathan (and whomever else the Lord may give)—to men wiser than I am who can encourage them to walk with God in all things. I love you, boys.

I bless the Father for giving His only begotten Son to save me to the utmost in both soul and body. May the Spirit continue to enable me to consecrate my life, labors, and time to the glory of the triune God and to the good of His church.

—Ryan M. McGraw

Note of interest: The image used at the end of most selections is a coat of arms that appears on a frontispiece portrait of John Owen.

In the unity of the God-head there be three Persons, of one substance, power and eternity. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son. Which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence upon him.

—Savoy Declaration of Faith


IOANNES OWEN S.T.P. DECAN. ED. CHR
ET PER QVINQVENN. VICE CANC. OXON.
Umbra refert fragiles, dederunt quæ cuncta doloqui;
Relliquias, studijs assiduusq; labor.
Mentem humilem, sacri servantem lumina veri,
Votis supplicibus, qui dedit, ille videt.

John Owen

The Trinitarian Piety of John Owen (1616–1683)

What does it mean to be Reformed? There are two ways to answer this question and John Owen exemplifies both answers. First, being Reformed means being part of a church that adheres to a historic Reformed confession. Second, and more importantly, a Reformed theologian will prove the content of his confession from Scripture. These two answers are like distinguishing between a single street and the lanes on the street.

Historically speaking, Reformed theology is a street on which all traffic flows through two lanes. These lanes are the doctrine of Scripture and the doctrine of God. From these two vital doctrines flow the entire system of Reformed theology.[1] Don't Reformed churches have the same doctrine of Scripture and doctrine of God as others, though? The answer is, yes and no. Those who are Reformed

1. See Richard A Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Ca. 1520 to Ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2003). Volume 1 of this set introduces the doctrines of Scripture and God as the two fundamental building blocks of Reformed theology. Volume 2 shows how Scripture fulfills this role, and volumes 3 and 4 do so in reference to the attributes of God and the Trinity.

and those who are not may hold common beliefs about the authority of the Bible and who God is. However, Reformed theology is marked by a belief in the highest sufficiency of Scripture and the absolute sovereign supremacy of God. The Reformed system of theology represents the humble attempt to apply the sufficiency of Scripture and the supremacy of God to every area of doctrine and life. This is the primary base that supports all Reformed confessions.

This is where John Owen comes in. Owen wonderfully teaches us the practical outworking of the Reformed doctrines of Scripture and of God through the themes of public worship and the Trinity. In his view, Reformed worship is the highest expression of the sufficiency of Scripture, and Trinitarian piety is the most glorious practical consequence of the supremacy of God. He combined these themes by teaching that public worship is the high point of communion with the triune God. Through his instruction, Owen potentially meets several contemporary needs at once. First, he provides us with a model of the inseparable connection between doctrine and piety in Reformed theology. Second, he places the doctrine of the Trinity, which is merely an intellectual exercise for many people, at the heart of Christian experience and godly living. Third, he recognizes that who we worship and how we worship Him is not a secondary question in the Christian life. Through presenting a practical, Trinitarian piety that climbs to the height of public worship as its peak, Owen can show us how to know by experience what it means to be Reformed. He also helped

write the *Savoy Declaration of Faith*, which was a Reformed Congregationalist confession based on the Westminster Confession of Faith. Owen expresses the practical trinitarian outworking of the Reformed faith in a way that few others have, with precision, depth, and devotion.

To show the significance of Owen's Trinitarian piety, this historical introduction first will provide a narrow sketch of Owen's life by emphasizing those circumstances that influenced his views of worship and piety. The second part introduces the themes of the readings that make up the bulk of this volume and explains their order and the sense of movement behind them. I have omitted footnotes and leave it to interested readers to work through my more technical book on Owen's theology.[2] After the selections from Owen's works, I conclude with a brief guide on how to read Owen and where to start.

Owen's Life

Many authors have recognized that John Owen is one of the most important theologians of the seventeenth century. People frequently complain that Owen's writings are difficult to read, but most who do read his works find that he is worth the effort. He was a first-rate pastor, a painstaking scholar, a strict professor, a zealous Puritan, a Reformed orthodox theologian, and a prolific writer. All of these things

2. Ryan M. McGraw, *"A Heavenly Directory": Trinitarian Piety, Public Worship, and a Reassessment of John Owen's Theology* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014). See this resource for the bibliographic information standing behind this present essay.

shaped Owen's Trinitarian piety and the importance that he placed on public worship.

Puritan and Student

Born in 1616, John Owen was the son of a Puritan minister, Henry Owen. The Puritan movement largely arose as an attempt to continue reforming the Church of England after Queen Elizabeth I had slowed earlier efforts. Two of the primary emphases of Puritanism were the purity of public worship and the cultivation of personal holiness. Owen singled out these two things as the most important aspects of reforming the church.

Owen became a student at Oxford University when he was a teenager. Today we think that attending a university at such a young age is a sign of unusual brilliance. However, most students in the early seventeenth century who studied at Oxford or Cambridge were between the ages of twelve and sixteen.

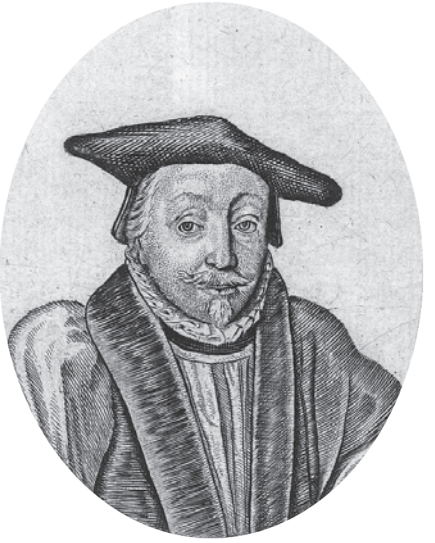
These young students went through a rigorous course of studies. They were disciplined if they were caught speaking any language other than Latin or classical Greek on campus. They endured a four-year bachelor's of arts course. For most, this transitioned into a master's of arts program. Students who went on to pursue the ministry began a seven-year course of studies in divinity. This bachelor of divinity degree included overwhelming reading lists and periodic disputations in which students defended theological positions in formal debate against other students or faculty. This bachelor's degree was roughly equivalent to a rigorous PhD program at the

present day. This is not an entirely accurate historical reference, but it may help some readers grasp the rigor required in these studies. Many of the most beloved Puritan authors that we read today for their warm, personal piety were highly educated men. They wedded an educated ministry with zeal and love for Christ.

Owen left Oxford after only two years of his divinity studies. Archbishop William Laud began to enforce liturgical reforms at the university, which included practices such as kneeling before the Lord's Supper, wearing clerical vestments, observing holy days, reintroducing crucifixes and images of God, and similar practices. Such things violated Owen's conscience because he saw no mandate for them in God's Word, which forced him to leave. This illustrates the prominent role that public worship played in his life. He was willing to suffer rather than to deny the sufficiency of Scripture as applied to public worship.

Rise to Prominence

Owen's gifts were soon noticed, and he gradually rose to prominence. After a brief time as a private chaplain, he became pastor of a congregation in Coggeshall. Early in his ministry, his convictions on church government shifted from Presbyterian to Congregational. In the mid 1640s, he began his writing career with *A Display of Arminianism*, which gained the attention of prominent ministers in England. When Oliver Cromwell heard Owen preach on one occasion, he was so impressed that he made it a point to get to know him. Cromwell



Archbishop William Laud (1573–1645)

Laud desired uniformity in the Church of England and was an opponent of the Puritans. He favored Arminianism and a High Church liturgy.

soon compelled Owen, who had no desire to leave his congregation, to serve as a military chaplain and to accompany him to Ireland. Also, Owen preached the Parliament sermon the day after the execution of King Charles I. In Ireland he reorganized Dublin University and preached to thousands. The Lord brought many to faith in Christ during this stage of his ministry.

Cromwell later appointed Owen to be dean of Christ Church at Oxford, and from 1653 to 1658 he served as vice-chancellor of the university, second only to Cromwell. During this time, Owen pastored an independent congregation with his friend and fellow at Oxford, Thomas Goodwin. It was during this period that Owen wrote some of his most beloved treatises, such as *Communion with God*, *The Mortification of Sin*, and his work on *Temptation*. Those who complain that these last two books are hard to read should note that they consist of sermons preached to teenagers at Oxford. In 1658, Owen and several other prominent Congregationalist ministers developed the Savoy Declaration of Faith. They based this document on the Westminster Confession of Faith, with some doctrinal refinements in general and a major revision of the section on church government. At Savoy, Owen and Thomas Goodwin were appointed to be the primary architects of this declaration. As we will see below, the title for this book is taken from this document.

When some pressured Cromwell to become king, Owen opposed him publicly because of his commitment to a republican government. As a result, he fell

A statue of Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) outside the Palace of Westminster

Lord Protector Cromwell persuaded Owen to accompany him to Ireland to serve as a military chaplain. Later, Owen opposed Cromwell's becoming king and fell out of favor.

out of favor with Cromwell and was removed from his post at the university. Cromwell died in 1658, and his son Richard succeeded him. Richard could not control the instability of the government at that time and resigned after only two years in power. The monarchy was soon restored, and the nation brought Charles II back to reign on his father's former throne.

Persecution and Ministry

The 1660s were turbulent times. After the restoration of the monarchy, the king and the Church of England clamped down hard on Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and other Puritans who had been integral to government affairs over the past decade. Persecution broke out, particularly in relation to public worship, since most Puritan-minded ministers could not submit to the practices of the English Book of Common Prayer. Many ministers were ejected from their pulpits, arrested, fined, and forced to move away from their congregations. Owen largely escaped this persecution due to his reputation and fame as an author, preacher, and theologian. Tension eased somewhat during the 1670s, by which time the Puritan movement had largely been divided or marginalized in England.

During the 1660s, despite the many restrictions that the civil authorities placed on Puritan pastors, Owen ministered to a small congregation of about thirty people. The man God used to preach for the conversion of thousands in Ireland and who was now more mature in his theology and in the use of his gifts labored faithfully over this little flock. In 1673,

Richard Cromwell (1626–1712)

Cromwell was appointed to succeed his father, Oliver, in the chancellorship. He dismissed Owen from his position at Oxford University.

Joseph Caryl, who was a member of the Westminster Assembly, died, and his and Owen's congregations merged. The combined congregation consisted of about 170 people.

Owen continued to write prolifically. In the latter part of the 1660s up to his death in 1683, Owen wrote two of his most significant works. He produced in segments both his work on the Holy Spirit (now volumes 3–4 in his *Works* in the Banner of Truth edition) and his treatment of the Epistle to the Hebrews (volumes 17–23 in the Banner of Truth edition). Both projects represent the mature development of Owen's thought and weave together all the themes of his life's work. His work on the Holy Spirit is possibly the most exhaustive and profound treatment of the person and work of the Spirit in the history of the Christian church. The material on Hebrews is exegetically exhaustive and precise and weaves in the entire system of Christian theology. His study of Hebrews reveals the importance of the twin themes of communion with the triune God and public worship in his thought. He believed that the primary theme of the book of Hebrews was the superiority of public worship under the new covenant. He argued that the primary benefit of new covenant worship was explicit communion with God as triune, with a special emphasis on the glory of Christ's person and work. The depth, precision, and scope of Owen's labors have earned for him the title the "Prince of the English Divines."

Death and Legacy

When Owen was on his deathbed in 1683, a friend brought him news that his book *Meditations and*

Discourses on the Glory of Christ was about to go to print. This was a fitting conclusion to the life of a man who strove with all of his might to teach others to come to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. For Owen, Christ was the centerpiece of the work of the triune God and the means by which believers know Him. Public worship was the most glorious means by which believers hold communion with God through Christ. The circumstances of Owen's life drove public worship to the center of his thinking, but he emphasized public worship for theological reasons as well. These reasons flow directly out of his teaching on communion with the triune God.

Owen's Theology and the Order of the Readings in this Book

With this sketch of Owen's life and career before us, we can now expand the historical context of the points of his theology that relate to this book. There is an intentional progression of thought in these selections through Owen's teaching on knowing God as triune, Scripture and worship, heavenly-mindedness, and covenant and church. These readings come from cross sections of the entire body of Owen's works.

His devotional emphasis on communion with the three persons of the Trinity is rare among Puritan authors in particular, and in the history of the Christian church in general. His beloved and intertwined themes of Trinity and worship bring the fundamental principles of Reformed theology to their devotional height in promoting personal piety. Owen's brand of piety was inherently Trinitarian. This practical

Trinitarianism is the primary gift that his works can bestow on modern readers. The themes of the selections from Owen's *Works* included in this book are summarized below in the order in which they appear.

Knowing God as Triune

The knowledge of God involves theology. In order to know God, it is important to begin with a sound understanding of what theology is. In Owen's view, theology and the experiential knowledge of God were largely synonymous. He believed that theology was both objective and subjective. Objectively, theology is a communication from the Father, through the Son, to the church by way of Scripture, which has been given to her through inspired prophets and apostles. Subjectively, theology is the renovation of a person from the Father, through the Son, and by the Spirit by means of God's revelation in Scripture. Owen taught that theology that did not grip people's hearts and bring them into communion with the triune God was not worthy of the name. Right thinking is Christian philosophy, but without the regenerating power of the Spirit, it is not true theology.

For these reasons, the selections from Owen's works begin with a statement of his goals in writing from *Vindiciae Evangelicae* (1655). His statement about the knowledge of God in the introduction to this work is significant because this is one of Owen's most technical, difficult, and polemic writings. Readers might not expect sound practical emphases in a work of this kind. This book is likely one of the longest book reviews in history. It is a line-by-line refutation of John Biddle's (1615–1662) *Scripture Catechism*. Biddle

was an English Socinian. Socinians, named after Faustus Socinus (1539–1604), denied the doctrine of the Trinity and were the precursors of the Unitarians. Socinians also limited the conclusions that they were willing to draw from Scripture to things comprehended by human reason. Biddle taught that God had a body, did not know the future, was circumscribed by time and space, and was not triune. He also taught that Christ did not die as a substitute for His people. The two areas in which Owen opposed Socinianism most vigorously were in relation to the persons of the Godhead and the nature of the atonement. Even in a highly polemicized context, Owen's first concern was for personal godliness.

Owen did not simply react to the false teachings of the Socinians. He took the occasion to develop a positive and devotional use of the doctrine of the Trinity. In *Communion with God* (1657), he taught that believers must not hold fellowship only with God in general but also with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit distinctly. The structure of this book teaches believers how to hold communion with the Father in love, with the Son in grace, and with the Spirit in comfort. This division of the book does not mean that love, grace, and comfort do not characterize our fellowship with all three persons of the Godhead. It means that these terms emphasize the special way in which each divine person works in our salvation and how we come to know them. It is my hope that the readings I have included here will lead people to read this important and unique book by Owen. The several parts of Owen's work on the Holy Spirit (published in the 1670s and 1680s) that

make up volumes 3 and 4 of his *Works* expand these themes as well.

Communion with God frequently highlights public worship as the highest expression of fellowship with the triune God. However, Owen's two sermons from the early 1670s on the nature and beauty of public worship treat communion with the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit exclusively in the context of using the ordinances of public worship rightly. These sermons follow the structure of *Communion with God*, with a more narrow focus of application. Owen developed his theme around communion with the three divine persons and developed the biblical principles of worship from the nature of this communion. By contrast, well-known Puritan authors such as Jeremiah Burroughs (1600–1646) and Stephen Charnock (1628–1680), who wrote extensively on public worship, said little about the Trinity in connection to worship.

The readings in this section will move through passages in which Owen teaches about communion with the Father, Son, and Spirit respectively. It will conclude by connecting these themes to public worship.

Scripture and Worship

In *War against the Idols*, author Carlos Eire argues that the distinctive emphasis of the Calvinistic branch of the Reformation was its zeal for regulating public worship according to Scripture alone.[3] Applying the

3. Carlos Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

sufficiency of Scripture to public worship was as essential to being a Calvinist as it later was to being a Puritan. The Savoy Declaration of Faith expresses this Reformed distinctive: "The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and is so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture" (22.1).

While the circumstances surrounding worship, such as the time of the service on the Lord's Day and whether the church met in a building or outside, were left to the discretion of the church, the ordinances that the church used in worship must be appointed by the triune God only. For example, the church must preach, pray, sing, and administer the sacraments, but it must not make images of any or all three persons of the Godhead, require ministers to wear a clerical uniform, or import religious significance into anything in worship beyond what God has given in His Word. The form of words that ministers used in ordinances such as preaching and prayer could vary, but the ordinances themselves were mandated. Ordinances that were not required by biblical mandate, approved by apostolic example, or necessitated by necessary deductions from the teaching of Scripture were forbidden. This Reformed principle of worship was itself a "good and necessary consequence" (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6) of the Reformed teaching on the sufficiency of Scripture. However, it also drew on express statements of Scripture, such as Deuteronomy 12:32: "What thing

soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it."

Owen's teaching on apostasy, images of Christ, and persecution highlight the importance of biblical worship in his teaching. These emphases pervade his writings, and the readings on this subject come from many different sources. He consistently showed that worshiping God according to Scripture is essential to promoting communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Heavenly-Mindedness and Apostasy

Owen taught people not only the principles needed to promote communion with God in worship but also how they can ruin their worship. His *Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded* (1681) includes two important chapters on public worship. One of these shows the many ways we can destroy communion with the triune God, even when we worship Him according to His commands alone. The other chapter teaches positively how to enjoy communion with God in public worship. His aim in both is to describe and to excite true spiritual affections in believers. Selections from this material balance the excerpts from his writings treating Scripture and worship. Owen taught that worship cannot promote communion with God unless it is biblical, but he also taught that even biblical worship cannot promote communion with God unless the heart is engaged. He consistently presented these issues in light of communion with the three persons of the Godhead. He included similar treatments in his work on apostasy from the gospel.

Covenant and Church

Covenant theology has always been integral to Reformed theology. In the seventeenth century, Reformed covenant theology grew in precision and detail. In the early 1640s, Scotsman David Dickson (1583–1662) popularized the term *covenant of redemption*. The doctrine this term represents existed long before Dickson, but it became more popular among Reformed theologians just as Owen was entering his public career. The *covenant of redemption* refers to an eternal covenant between the Father and the Son in which the Father promised to give the elect to His Son, and the Son agreed to take on human flesh and purchase the redemption of His people. This is distinguished from the covenant of grace that God made in Christ with the elect in human history. The difference and relationship between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace is like the difference between the decrees of God and providence. The covenant of redemption was the aspect of the decree of the triune God that related to man's redemption. Just as providence comes to pass according to the decrees of God, so the covenant of grace comes to pass according to the intra-Trinitarian covenant of redemption.

This distinction enabled Owen to root his covenant theology in the Trinity. The covenant of redemption is a work of the triune God from eternity past. It is between the Father and the Son, and the Spirit agreed, according to this covenant, to be sent by the Father and the Son to apply redemption to the elect. As a result of this plan, God made a covenant of works with Adam. When Adam broke this

covenant, God promised to save His people through the covenant of grace in the Christ who would come. The law of Moses set forth the conditions that Christ would fulfill in order to satisfy the terms of the broken covenant of works.[4] When Christ came in the fullness of time, He obeyed the law of the covenant of works and bore the penalty that His people deserved for breaking it. This is the point where the covenant of redemption came to full fruition in the covenant of grace. Before and after Christ's coming, God required His people to repent of their sins and believe in Christ in order to belong to the covenant of grace in Christ. The Holy Spirit, who voluntarily condescended to be sent by the Father and the Son, ensures that the elect will come to the Father through the Son by giving them new hearts so that they can repent and believe in Christ.

Christ's coming brought great changes in terms of communion with God in public worship. Owen contrasted old covenant and new covenant worship. Old covenant, or Mosaic worship, consisted of a large number of external ceremonies, while new covenant worship consisted of a few simple ceremonies. Old covenant worship looked to the Christ who would come, and new covenant worship remembers the Christ who has come. Old covenant worship was marked by external glory and beauty while the

4. Owen's construction of the Mosaic covenant is much more complicated than that of other seventeenth-century authors. For a fuller treatment of his teaching, see chapter 5 of McGraw, "*Heavenly Directory*"; and "The Minority Report: John Owen on Sinai," in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, by Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 293–303.

glory of new covenant worship consists of simplicity and more glorious spiritual communion with God. The relevant point is that Owen believed that one of the primary benefits of new covenant worship was explicitly communion with God as triune.

Owen's teaching on the Christian ministry was related closely to his views of communion with the Trinity in public worship. He taught that the Christian ministry was the means through which God intended to bless His people in public worship. As part of many liturgies, pastors proclaim a benediction, or blessing, from God at the end of public worship. Without denying this aspect of worship, Owen pointed out that God made the office of minister to be benedictory. The minister implicitly pronounces God's blessing on His people by dispensing the public ordinances of worship. This section of the readings includes Owen's teaching on benedictions, preaching, and the Lord's Supper as examples of these principles.

Owen's covenant theology culminates in the work of the triune God in the church. According to him, Christian ministers are servants who, by the Spirit's grace, bring people into communion with all three divine persons through the ordinances of public worship. This section of the readings completes the picture of Owen's practical Trinitarian theology.

Conclusion

The Savoy Declaration of Faith says that the doctrine of the Trinity "is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence upon him" (2.3). This statement represents the heart of

John Owen's legacy to the church in all subsequent ages. For that reason, it forms the basis of the title of this book. He teaches us in practice what it means to be Reformed. He was a Reformed theologian because he held to a Reformed confession. He even coauthored one. He applied his Reformed doctrine of Scripture to the principles and practice of public worship. He utilized his Reformed doctrine of God to build a practical Trinitarian theology. As a Puritan, he combined both the doctrine of Scripture and the doctrine of God in a practical manner that leaves us with a rich legacy to build upon. It is my hope and prayer that the selections from his *Works* that follow will help readers see why reading Owen is worth their effort and begin reading more of his writings. Even more importantly, I pray that this book will help readers develop a deep-seated and explicitly Trinitarian piety.

SECTION ONE

Knowing God as Triune

Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680)

Goodwin shared a pulpit with Owen at St. Mary's, and he and Owen were primary architects of the Savoy Declaration of Faith.

1

Experimental Theology

When the heart is cast indeed into the mold of the doctrine that the mind embraces; when the evidence and necessity of the truth abides in us; when not the sense of the words only is in our heads, but the sense of the things abides in our hearts; when we have communion with God in the doctrine we contend for—then we will be garrisoned, by the grace of God, against all the assaults of men. And without this, all our contending is, as to ourselves, of no value.

What am I the better if I can dispute that Christ is God, but have no sense or sweetness in my heart from hence that He is a God in covenant with my soul? What will it avail me to evince, by testimonies and arguments, that He has made satisfaction for sin if, through my unbelief, the wrath of God abides on

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From *Vindiciae Evangelicae, or, A Vindication of the Gospel*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 12:52. Unless otherwise noted, all excerpts come from the Banner of Truth edition of Owen's *Works*. This edition is identical to the nineteenth-century William Goold edition, with the exception of the omission of the Latin works in what used to be volume 17 and the rearrangement of volume 16. In the Banner edition, volume 17 is the beginning of Owen's work on Hebrews. In order to introduce readers to Owen's writings and make them more accessible, I have updated his language and punctuation and added paragraph breaks.

me and I have no experience of my own being made the righteousness of God in Him—if I find not, in my standing before God, the excellency of having my sins imputed to Him and His righteousness imputed to me? Will it be any advantage to me, in the issue, to profess and dispute that God works the conversion of a sinner by the irresistible grace of His Spirit if I was never acquainted experimentally with the deadness and utter impotency to do good, that opposition to the law of God that is in my own soul by nature, with the efficacy of the exceeding greatness of the power of God in quickening, enlightening, and bringing forth the fruits of obedience in me?

It is the power of truth in the heart alone that will make us cleave to it indeed in an hour of temptation. Let us, then, not think that we are any better for our conviction of the truths of the great doctrines of the gospel, for which we contend with those men,[1] unless we find the power of the truths abiding in our own hearts and have a continual experience of their necessity and excellency in our standing before God and our communion with Him.

1. Here Owen refers to the Socinians, who denied the Trinity and the satisfaction of Christ and taught that God had a body and did not know the future, among other things.

2

Communion with God

By nature, since the entrance of sin, no man has any communion with God. He is light, we darkness. What communion has light with darkness? He is life, we are dead. He is love, and we are enmity. What agreement can there be between us? Men in such a condition have neither Christ, nor hope, nor God in the world (Eph. 2:12); they are "alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them" (Eph. 4:18). Now, two cannot walk together, unless they are agreed (Amos 3:3). While there is this distance between God and man, there is no walking together for them in any fellowship or communion. Our first interest in God was so lost by sin that there was left to us (in ourselves) no possibility of a recovery. As we had deprived ourselves of all power for a return, so God had not revealed any way of access to Himself or that He could, under any consideration, be approached by sinners in peace. Not any work that God had made, not any attribute that He had revealed, could give the least light into such a dispensation.

The manifestation of grace and pardoning mercy, which is the only door of entrance into any such communion, is not committed to any but to Him

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From *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:6, 8–9.

alone in whom it is, by whom that grace and mercy was purchased, through whom it is dispensed, who reveals it from the bosom of the Father.

Now, communion is the mutual communication of such good things as wherein the persons holding that communion are delighted, bottomed upon some union between them. So it was with Jonathan and David; their souls clave to one another in love (1 Sam. 20:17). There was the union of love between them, and then they really communicated all issues of love mutually. In spiritual things this is more eminent: those who enjoy this communion have the most excellent union for the foundation of it, and the issues of that union, which they mutually communicate, are the most precious and eminent.

Our communion with God, then, consists in His communication of Himself to us, with our return to Him of that which He requires and accepts flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with Him. And it is twofold: (1) perfect and complete, in the full fruition of His glory and total giving up of ourselves to Him, resting in Him as our utmost end, which we shall enjoy when we see Him as He is; and (2) initial and incomplete, in the firstfruits and dawnings of that perfection we have here in grace, which only I shall handle.

It is, then, I say, of that mutual communication in giving and receiving after a most holy and spiritual manner, which is between God and the saints while they walk together in a covenant of peace, ratified in the blood of Jesus, whereof we are to treat. And this we shall do if, God permit, in the meantime praying the God and Father of our Lord and Savior, Jesus

Christ, who has, of the riches of His grace, recovered us from a state of enmity into a condition of communion and fellowship with Himself, that both He that writes and they that read the words of His mercy may have such a taste of His sweetness and excellencies therein as to be stirred up to a farther longing after the fullness of His salvation and the eternal fruition of Him in glory.

3

How We Commune with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

This, then, drives further on the truth that lies under demonstration: there being such a distinct communication of grace from the several persons of the Deity, the saints must needs have distinct communion with them.

It remains only to intimate, in a word, wherein this distinction lies and what the ground thereof is. Now, this is that the Father does it by the way of original authority; the Son by the way of communicating from a purchased treasury; the Holy Spirit by the way of immediate efficacy.

First, the Father communicates all grace by the way of *original authority*: "He quickeneth whom he will" (John 5:21). "Of his own will begat he us" (James 1:18). Life-giving power is, in respect of original authority, invested in the Father by the way of eminency; therefore, in sending the quickening Spirit, Christ is said to do it from the Father, or the Father Himself to do it. "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send" (John 14:26). "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father" (John 15:26),

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From *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:16–17.

though He is also said to send Him Himself, in another account (John 16:7).

Second, the Son, by the way of making out a *purchased treasury*: "Of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace" (John 1:16). And whence is this fullness? "It pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell" (Col. 1:19). And upon what account He has the dispensation of that fullness to Him committed you may see in Philippians 2:8–11. "When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities" (Isa. 53:10–11). And with this fullness He has also authority for the communication of it (John 5:25–27; Matt. 28:18).

Third, the Spirit does it by the way of *immediate efficacy*: "But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you" (Rom. 8:11). Here are all three comprised, with their distinct concurrence to our quickening. Here is the Father's authoritative quickening—"He raised Christ from the dead, and he shall quicken you"; and the Son's mediatorial quickening—for it is done in "the death of Christ"; and the Spirit's immediate efficacy—"He shall do it by the Spirit that dwelleth in you." He that desires to see this whole matter explained further may consult what I have elsewhere written on this subject. And thus is the distinct communion whereof we treat both proved and demonstrated.