

## Introduction

All legitimate branches of theology must eventually find their apex in practical theology—that branch of theology that supports the Christian ministry as the source of the church’s life and health. Philip Schaff says, “Theology in all its branches is not a barren study for the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity; it is eminently practical and fruitful in its spirit and aim.”<sup>1</sup> The Puritan movement in England<sup>2</sup> was particularly cognizant of this. J. Ligon Duncan, modern Presbyterian pastor and theology professor, says:

The Puritan movement bequeathed to us a tradition of pastoral theology unsurpassed in the history of Christianity in the English-speaking world. We need to hear them because a significant proportion of the church of our day has decided that its ministry should be carried out pragmatically rather than theologically. ‘What works’ is more important to some today than ‘What is Biblical’. The Puritans were not tempted by such modern folly and in their history, lives and writings they offer to us a pattern of ministry that was both theologically informed and pastorally effective. If we truly want to minister Biblically and effectively in the twenty-first century, then we are wise to sit at the feet of the Puritans.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Schaff, *Theological Propaedeutic* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1894), 448; A. A. Hodge lists the major branches of theology as Exegetical (under which he subsumes Biblical theology), Systematic, Practical, and Historical. He says, “As Systematic theology roots itself in a thorough Exegesis...so does Practical Theology root itself in the great principles developed by Systematic Theology, the department of Ecclesiology being common ground to both departments: the product of the one, and the foundation of the other.” See A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (1879; repr., Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 24; William Ames defines theology with its *practical* outcome in mind as “the doctrine or teaching [*doctrina*] of living to God.” See Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, tran. and ed. John Dykstra Eusden (1629; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, Co., 1997), 77; Francis Turretin writes “that theology is more practical than speculative is evident from the ultimate end, which is practice.” Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992), 23; Richard Muller furthermore says, “The unity of theological study via the examination of the biblical, historical, and systematic disciplines *as they relate* to the life of the believing community is not, therefore, a purely academic, curricular, or theoretical issue. It is an issue involving the most fundamental values in and of the practice of Christianity.” See Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary formulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 160.

<sup>2</sup> The Puritan movement is generally regarded as spanning the century from the death of Queen Mary and the ascension of Queen Elizabeth to the throne in 1558, to the collapse of the Parliamentary Interregnum and the Restoration of the monarchy under King Charles II in 1660. Some place Puritanism’s terminus as late as 1705 with the death of John Howe or 1758 with the death of Jonathan Edwards.

<sup>3</sup> J. Ligon Duncan, “Introduction” in *The English Puritans: The Rise and Fall of the Puritan Movement* by John Brown (repr., Geanies House, Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 1998), 7.

There are those who would insist that pastoral theology was the very essence of Puritanism. Puritan authority D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says otherwise, but nevertheless would agree that it consumed the attention particularly of such early Puritans as Richard Greenham, John Rogers, and William Perkins who's "peculiar emphasis was on this pastoral aspect."<sup>4</sup> J. I. Packer regards Puritanism as "a many-sided religious movement that had evangelism and nurture at its heart." For Packer it was a "pastoral movement, in which conformists and nonconformists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists, and Erastians were all essentially at one."<sup>5</sup> Peter Lewis, in his yeoman's study on the *Genius of Puritanism*, observes "that among the Puritans of sixteenth and seventeenth-century England, pastoral work was not the light and uncertain thing which it has largely become in our own day."<sup>6</sup>

One engaging portrait of the Puritan minister is found in John Bunyan's (1628-1688) classic allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Christian, on his way from the "city of Destruction" to "Mount Zion", visits the house of the Interpreter where he is shown many "excellent things" of help for his journey. Chief among them is the picture of "very grave person" hanging upon a wall. Bunyan describes the portrait: "It had eyes lifted up to Heaven, the best of Books in his hand, the Law of Truth was written upon his

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<sup>4</sup> D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors—Addresses Delivered at the Puritan and Westminster Conferences 1959-1978* (1987; repr., Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 239. Lloyd-Jones discusses the issue regarding the essence of Puritanism and rejects the notion that it is *merely* a pastoral movement (what he calls the Anglican view) in favor of Puritanism as a movement toward furthering the Reformation. He says, "The notion of an incomplete Reformation... is the essential and most characteristic note of Puritanism—the feeling that the Reformation had not gone far enough." See Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans*, 242. Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson also discuss the various views regarding Puritanism's essential character which could be summarized under the rubrics of polemical (doctrines like predestination or covenant), political, or pietistic. See, Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), xvi.

<sup>5</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 51; He furthermore says, "If the Reformers are classic theologians, then the Puritans are classic pastors and spiritual guides, as any who read them will soon find." Packer, 69.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism* (Sussex: Carey Publications, Limited, n.d.), 63.

lips, the World was behind his back; it stood as if it pleaded with men, and a Crown of Gold did hang over its head.”<sup>7</sup> Inquiring as to its meaning, Christian was told:

The man whose picture this is, is one of a thousand; he can beget children, travail in birth with children, and nurse them himself when they are born. And whereas thou seest him with his eyes lifted up to Heaven, the best of Books in his hand, and the Law of Truth writ on his lips; it is to shew thee, that his work is to know and unfold dark things to Sinners; even as also thou seest him stand as if he pleaded with men; and whereas thou seest the World as cast behind him, and that a Crown hangs over his head; that is to show thee, that slighting and despising the things that are present, for the love that he hath to his Master’s service, he is sure in the World that comes next, to have Glory for his reward.<sup>8</sup>

The grave person is so described, not because he is cheerless or morose, but because of the dignity and weight of his calling. He is described as one who can lead sinners to Christ, offer counsel amidst life’s confusion, and provide nurture toward maturity in the faith. His life and ministry are rooted in the word of God and emboldened by affections that are set on heavenly things. He is not encumbered with worldliness. The Interpreter continues:

I have shown thee this picture first, because the man whose picture this is, is the only man whom the Lord of the place wither thou art going, hath authorized to be thy Guide in all difficult places thou may’st meet with in the Way: Wherefore take good heed to what I have showed thee, and bear well in thy mind what thou hast seen; lest in thy Journey thou meet with some that pretend to lead thee right, but their way goes down to death.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most noted and authorized “guide” in the church of the seventeenth-century was the one who is regarded as the quintessential Puritan theologian, John Owen. Owen observed the ministry of Bunyan with great interest and most notably “admired his

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<sup>7</sup> John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress: From This World to That Which is To Come* (1895; repr., Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 25. Barry E. Horner, in his study on the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, calls this “the portrait of a godly pastor” and points out that Bunyan probably had his own pastor John Gifford in mind in this portrayal. Horner says that, “Bunyan’s statue, erected at the corner of St. Peter’s Green, Bedford in 1874, is modeled on this portrait in the Interpreter’s house, and rightly so.” See Horner, *Pilgrim’s Progress: Themes and Issues* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2003), 261.

<sup>8</sup> *Pilgrim’s Progress*, 25-26.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

ability as a preacher.”<sup>10</sup> He was even responsible for arranging the publication of *Pilgrim’s Progress* with his own publisher, Nathaniel Ponder. On one occasion King Charles II reportedly asked Owen why he could endure the prating of an uneducated tinker. Owen responded, “May it please your majesty, could I possess the tinker’s ability for preaching, I would willingly relinquish all my learning.”<sup>11</sup> However, if Owen received much from John Bunyan, the tinker certainly learned much from Owen as well.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the legacy of John Owen has been an incalculable encouragement to countless “tinkers” turned preacher throughout the centuries since his death. Owen’s writings have stimulated the thinking, fed the souls, and challenged the hearts of nondescript shepherds of God’s flock through the years and enabled them to persevere in seasons of distress and grief. But Owen did not only explore the depths of the Reformed faith, he also had much to say about the Christian ministry which is the topic of this essay.

### **John Owen the Pastor**

The mere mention of the name, John Owen,<sup>13</sup> will call to remembrance the seventeenth-century’s foremost theological mind. However, of his forty years of active

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Toon, *God’s Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1971), 162.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Thompson, “Life of Dr. Owen,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (1850-1853; repr., Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965): 1.xcii.

<sup>12</sup> Horner points out that Bunyan’s view of the pastoral office was influenced not only from the Bible, but his fraternity and friendships with other ministerial colleagues, one of whom he lists as John Owen. See Horner, 274.

<sup>13</sup> For biographies on the life of Owen see John Asty, “Memoirs of the Life of John Owen,” in *A Complete Collection of the Sermons of John Owen* (London, 1721); Andrew Thompson, “The Life of Dr. Owen,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (1850-1853; repr., Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 1:xix-cxxii; Peter Toon, *God’s Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1971). Short biographical sketches of Owen can also be found in: Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 1-19; Robert W. Oliver, “John Owen: His Life and Times,” in *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, ed. Robert W. Oliver (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 9-39; John D. Payne, *John Owen on the Lord’s Supper* (Carlisle:

ministry, nearly thirty were spent as a pastor ministering the gospel in several different churches. To be sure, his pen was his greatest legacy. But he wrote as a shepherd of the church, for the edification, defense, and unity of the church.<sup>14</sup>

Born to the family of a Puritan minister in Stadhampton, John Owen (1616-1683) was educated at Queens College, Oxford where he received his B.A. (1632) and M.A. (1635). His subsequent ministerial studies were cut short due to conflicts with Laudian reforms. After employment as a tutor and serving pastorates at Fordham (1643-1646) and Coggeshall (1646-1648), Owen gained the recognition of the emerging political powerhouse, Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), and served under him as a chaplain during his campaigns to Ireland (1649) and Scotland (1650). Upon his return he was appointed dean of Christ College, Oxford and two years later in 1652 he became Vice Chancellor. His illustrious career in academia and public life, however, came to an end with the death of Cromwell in 1658 and the subsequent Restoration of King Charles II to the throne in 1660. In 1662 everything changed for Puritan ministers with the Great Ejection and the cruel policies of the Clarendon Code<sup>15</sup> which forced nonconforming ministers from their churches into lives of virtual destitution. From 1662 until his death in 1683 Owen served as a disenfranchised minister, shepherding conventicle churches, advancing the cause of

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The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 1-17; Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 455-463.

<sup>14</sup> When Owen assumed the ministry at Fordham, he signed the register as follows: “John Owen, Pastor, Anno. Dom. July:16:1643.” Biographer Peter Toon comments, “The word ‘pastor’ is significant suggesting that Owen did not think of his calling as that of a ‘vicar’ or ‘rector,’ but rather as the pastor of the faithful in the parish and evangelist to the rest.” See Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> The Clarendon Code comprised four legal sanctions enacted from 1661-1665 which established the supremacy of Anglicanism in the aftermath of the Commonwealth: 1) Corporation Act (1661) rejected the Solemn League and Covenant (1643), excluded non-conformist from public office, and required Anglican communion; 2) Act of Uniformity (1662) made the *Book of Common Prayer* mandatory for worship (also known as the “great ejection” as over 2000 Puritan ministers lost their privilege to preach); 3) Conventicle Act (1664) forbid unauthorized gatherings for worship (no more than five people of different households could gather); 4) Five-Mile Act (1665) prevented ministers from coming near former congregations or incorporated towns. The Clarendon Code proved to be the height of religious intolerance. See Toon, 125n.

Congregationalism, and writing some the most substantial of his eighty-six written works. He concluded the final decade of his life (1673-1683) as senior minister of the Leadenhall Street Church in London where Westminster Divine Joseph Caryl once served.

In opening the topic of *John Owen on the Christian Ministry*, the primary interest will be three extant ordination sermons he preached during the later years of his life while ministering in London. Whether by design or not, the three sermons form a composite picture of the pastoral office. They appear consecutively as sermons III-V in part three, volume nine of the *Works of John Owen*,<sup>16</sup> a grouping entitled “Posthumous Sermons” published in 1756. They are entitled *The Ministry a Gift of Christ, Ministerial Endowments the Work of the Spirit*, and *The Duties of a Pastor*. They will be referred to simply as the first, second, and third ordination sermons.

There are other works of Owen that have bearing on the Christian ministry. *Duties of Pastors and People Distinguished*<sup>17</sup> (1643) was written during his days at Fordham when he still regarded himself as a Presbyterian. As a young minister Owen was concerned to articulate a vision for a “pure, orthodox, well-ordered church.”<sup>18</sup> He addresses one aspect of such a church by navigating his way between the poles of independency and prelacy. He explains:

Some would have all Christians to be *almost ministers*; others, *none but ministers* to be God’s *clergy*. Those would give the people the keys, these use them to lock them out of the church; the one ascribing to them primarily all ecclesiastical power for the ruling of the congregation, the other abridging them of the performance of spiritual duties for the building of their own souls: as though there were no habitable earth between the valley...of *democratical confusion* and the precipitous rock of *hierarchical tyranny*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (1850-1853; repr., Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 9:431-462.

<sup>17</sup> *Works*, 13:1-49.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:39.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:5.

His design was “that the sacred calling may retain its ancient dignity, though the people of God be not deprived of their Christian liberty.”<sup>20</sup> To support his ministry of preaching, visiting, and catechizing families house to house he produced a catechetical tool entitled, *The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ Unfolded, in Two Short Catechisms*<sup>21</sup> (1645)—one for children; one for adults. Such devices were typical among Reformation churches in general and Puritan churches in particular. J. Lewis Wilson, in an essay on *Catechisms and the Puritans*, claims that, “When they wrote catechisms the Puritans were following...the example of the ‘best reformed churches.’”<sup>22</sup>

At St. Peter’s in Coggeshall<sup>23</sup> (1646-1648), Owen wholeheartedly embraced Congregationalism over and against his formerly held Presbyterian views.<sup>24</sup> However, Packer makes an important observation. He says, “Owen’s adoption of Independent

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<sup>20</sup> *Works*, 13:5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:464-494.

<sup>22</sup> J. Lewis Wilson, “Catechisms and the Puritans,” in *Puritan Papers, 1965-1967*, ed. J. I. Packer (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2004), 4:139. It was the conviction of Puritan ministers, according to the Wilson “that preaching alone without some form of ‘familiar personal instruction’ frequently failed.” Noting the emergence of as many as five-hundred catechisms [on page 138] during the century following Calvin, Wilson continues, “The multiplicity of catechisms has to be seen, in one sense, as an expression of a conscientious pastoral ideal, to communicate the ‘principles of religion’ in a particular local situation.” See Wilson, 145, 153.

<sup>23</sup> Coggeshall, just five miles from Fordham, was a parish of about two-thousand souls. It was considerably more prosperous and had enjoyed the ministry of Westminster Divine Obadiah Sedgwick just prior to Owen’s arrival. At Coggeshall Owen was granted numerous opportunities to preach at Parliamentary functions where he formed a network of well positioned friends.

<sup>24</sup> Owen explains his change in views as follows: “I was then a young man myself [at the publication of *The Duties of Pastors and People Distinguished* (1643)], about the age of twenty-six or twenty-seven years. The controversy between Independency and Presbytery was young also, nor, indeed, by me clearly understood, especially as stated on the congregational side....I professed myself of the presbyterian judgment, in opposition to democratical confusion; and, indeed, so I do still, and so do all the congregational men in England that I am acquainted withal....Of the congregational way I was not acquainted with one person, minister or other....But sundry books being published on either side, I perused and compared them with the Scripture and one another, according as I received ability from God. After a general view of them, as was my manner in other controversies, I fixed on one to take under peculiar consideration and examination, which seemed most methodically and strongly to maintain that which was contrary, as I thought, to my present persuasion. This was Mr. [John] Cotton’s book of the Keys [that is, *Keys of the King of Heaven* (1644)]....In the pursuit and management of this work, quite beside and contrary to my expectation,...I was prevailed on to receive that and those principles which I had thought to have set myself in an opposition unto.” See Owen, *Works*, 13:222-223.

principles of polity did not affect in the least his adherence to Presbyterian principles regarding ministerial order, character, and authority.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Owen authority Sinclair B. Ferguson says, “Owen’s congregationalism is essentially a truncated form of Presbyterianism.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, his view of the Christian ministry is not unique to his ecclesiology.

Congregationalism denied the notion of a national church, where all citizens were members in some respect, in favor of the church as a community of “visible saints”—that is, professing believers who manifest the fruit of righteousness. Toon explains the model under which Owen began to work:

In practical terms Owen’s new ecclesiastical position meant that he continued to hold the statutory Sunday services for the whole parish based on the Directory [of Public Worship] and at a different time of the day or on a weekday those who were visible saints met for mutual edification. Only to this gathered church would he have administered the Holy Communion.<sup>27</sup>

Owen describes the shape of such gatherings in a popular handbook entitled *Eshcol: a Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan... Or, Rules of Direction for the walking of the Saints*<sup>28</sup> (1647). With uncharacteristic brevity, he sets forth rules for congregants with reference to their pastor and with regard to mutual fellowship. These convictions would drive Owen’s ecclesiology for the rest of his life.

After the Great Ejection, Owen became the leading voice of Congregational nonconformity. Toon explains the challenges that Owen and other ministers faced at this time:

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<sup>25</sup> Packer, 226.

<sup>26</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 161.

<sup>27</sup> Toon, 28. Owen had come under the influence of Westminster’s dissenting independent minority Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Sidrach Simpson, Jeremiah Burroughs, and William Bridge. Together they produced *An Apologeticall Narration* (1643) which, along with Cotton’s *Keys*, formed the basis of Owen’s new ecclesiastical convictions. See Toon, 18.

<sup>28</sup> *Works*, 13:51-87.

From 1662 to 1689 Nonconformists lived under the dark cloud of repressive legislation and of this the pastor and his flock had to take careful notice. Owen and most of the ejected ministers who became nonconformists seem to have regarded both the Five Mile Act and Conventicle Act as legislation they should not necessarily obey.<sup>29</sup>

Owen expounds his Congregational ecclesiology in the *True Nature of a Gospel Church*<sup>30</sup> (1689) published after his death. One chapter in particular, “The especial duty of pastors of churches”, practically parallels the final ordination sermon mentioned above.

Furthermore, Owen’s skill at casuistry is observed with sixteen individual cases of conscience preserved in a section called *Several Practical Cases of Conscience Resolved*.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps Owen made his greatest contribution to the Christian ministry in his *Discourse of Spiritual Gifts*<sup>32</sup> (1693) where he broached his topic as a subsequent part of his magisterial work on the *Holy Spirit* (1674). Packer says concerning this work, “The subject of spiritual gifts was not much debated in Puritan theology, and the only full-scale treatment of it by a major writer, so far as I know, is John Owen’s *Discourse of Spiritual Gifts*.”<sup>33</sup> The contents of his first two ordination sermons are drawn almost entirely from the *Discourse*.<sup>34</sup> For Owen, spiritual gifts are “‘the powers of the age to come,’ by means whereof the kingdom of Christ is preserved, carried on, and propagated in the world.”<sup>35</sup> Spiritual gifts are “spiritual endowments” rather than a minister’s inherent natural or

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<sup>29</sup> Toon, 150.

<sup>30</sup> *Works*, 16:1-208.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:358-405.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:420-520.

<sup>33</sup> Packer, 219. According to Packer *On Spiritual Gifts*, though published posthumously in 1693, was written in 1679 or 1680. See Packer, 219, 352n1.

<sup>34</sup> Compare *Works*, 4:486-498 with 9:431-441; and, 4:498-508 with 9:441-452. Furthermore, Owen’s final ordination sermon on *Duties of a Pastor* also draws significantly from the *Discourse*.

<sup>35</sup> *Works*, 4:421.

moral qualities. Owen says, “Their *author* is the Holy Spirit; their *nature* is spiritual; and the *objects* about which they are exercised are *spiritual things*.”<sup>36</sup>

Owen regards church offices to which ministers are called to be within the purview of spiritual gifts. When the Lord Jesus grants power to his churches and requires duties in performance of that power, Owen says “there is an office in the church.”<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, Owen defines an ecclesiastical office as “an especial power given by Christ unto any person or persons for the performance of especial duties belonging unto the edification of the church in an especial manner.”<sup>38</sup> He distinguishes church offices in a typical Reformed pattern.<sup>39</sup> Extraordinary offices accompanied by extraordinary or miraculous gifts are foundational and temporary through the apostolic period. They include apostle, prophet, and evangelist. Ordinary offices accompanied by ordinary gifts are those which continue to the end of the age. They are the offices of pastor, teacher, ruler and deacon in particular. Owen says regarding the ordinary gifts which accompany these offices:

They are called ordinary, not as if they were absolutely common unto all, or were not much to be esteemed, or as if that were any way a diminishing term; but we call them so...in distinction from those gifts which...did exceed the whole power and faculties of the souls of men...[and with regard to] their continuance in the ordinary state of the church.<sup>40</sup>

When Owen speaks on the Christian ministry in his ordination sermons, he is concerned with the ordinary office and the ordinary gifts. Thus he is interested in the ministry as both a gift of Christ and a spiritual endowment. In his *Discourse* he says, “Now, my design is to treat peculiarly of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But because there is a gift of

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<sup>36</sup> *Works*, 4:424.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:438.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.4; Ames, *Marrow*, 182-196; Owen, *Works*, 4.491-492.

<sup>40</sup> *Works*, 4:486.

Christ which is the foundation and subject of them, something must be spoken briefly unto that in the first place. And this gift of Christ is that of the ministry of the church.”<sup>41</sup>

Biographer Peter Toon considers the gospel ministry to be the great interest that drove Owen throughout his life. In summarizing his career Toon says:

Owen’s primary motivation and aim during his crowded life in the 1650s was the propagation of the Protestant gospel. After 1660 the same aim was also always before him, but necessarily, due to the changed religious scene and to his own compromising principles, the public opportunities with which he was presented were severely curtailed.<sup>42</sup>

### **John Owen and the Christian Ministry**

With regard to the three ordination sermons, the identity of the ordinands and the location of the events are not disclosed. The three sermons were preached five years apart or over nearly a ten year period. Together, however, they picture Owen’s view of the Christian ministry. The first sermon declares the glory of the ministry as the gift of Christ. The second sermon sets forth the power of the ministry in the endowments of the Spirit. The third sermon presents the work of the ministry as bound up in faithfully fulfilling the duties of the minister.

### **The Role of Christ in the Christian Ministry**

The Westminster Assembly declared that the ministry is the gift of Christ to his visible church. The *Confession of Faith* states, “Unto this catholic visible church *Christ hath given the ministry (emphasis mine)*, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world.”<sup>43</sup> Owen says fundamentally the same thing in his first ordination sermon preached on January 23,

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<sup>41</sup> *Works*, 4:486.

<sup>42</sup> Toon, 123.

<sup>43</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 25.3.

1673, the content of which is found in chapter six of his *Discourse of Spiritual Gifts*.<sup>44</sup> His text was Ephesians 4:8: “When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.” It is important to keep in mind that for Owen both the ministry *and* the minister are regarded as gifts of Christ. In *Eschol* he says congregants will rightly esteem them “when they conscientiously consider that even the lives of their teachers are an ordinance of God.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, “The office, and persons to discharge that office” are viewed as the “eminent fruit of the exaltation of Christ, and a great expression and pledge of his care and love towards his church.”<sup>46</sup> J. I Packer distinguishes Owen’s view of the ministry as a gift from Christ to his church from the prevailing view of Papacy and Prelacy in his day:

He affirms the standard Reformed view of ordination as an act of Christ conferring office through the action of the church, rather than as an act of the church delegating to the ordinand its own inherent powers. He also sets forth exactly the standard Reformed distinction between the offices of apostle, evangelist, and prophet, which were temporary and extraordinary, ceasing with the apostolic age, and the office of presbyter, which is permanent and ordinary, and is to last till the Lord returns.<sup>47</sup>

### ***The Ministry a Gift of Christ***

For Owen, “The foundation of the ministry is in the gift of Christ.”<sup>48</sup> As the Pharisees once asked Jesus whether the baptism of John was from God or man, Owen asks the same of the Christian ministry. Drawing attention to the Lord’s promise of faithful shepherds, whom Jeremiah says “shall feed you with knowledge and

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<sup>44</sup> *Works*, 4:486-498.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:57-58.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:431.

<sup>47</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 226.

<sup>48</sup> *Works*, 9:431; Owen is consistent with his predecessor John Calvin in this regard who says that the Christian ministry “is the chief sinew by which believers are held together in one body.... Though the ministers to whom he has entrusted this office and has confirmed the good to carry it out, he dispenses and distributes his gifts to the church; and he shows himself as though present by manifesting the power of his spirit in this his institution, that it be not vain or idol.” *Institutes*, 4.3.2.

understanding” (Jer. 3:14-15; cf. 23:4), he regards it as “the great promise, that, under the gospel, Christ would give ministers to his church.”<sup>49</sup>

Recognizing that the Lord Jesus called, chose, and sent apostles during his public ministry, it is asked how this is to be accomplished in Christ’s absence with regard to the ministers of his church.<sup>50</sup> For Owen, there are “four ways or means” in which the Lord continues “to give ministers, in all ages, unto his church.” First, as Mediator, Christ establishes the office of ministry.<sup>51</sup> Since all power is given to him, he alone has authority to do this. According to Owen, it is a “standing law, ordinance, and institution of the gospel.” Thus for Owen, “The neglect of the work and office of ministry is...rebellion against the authority of Christ.” Owen says that the exalted Christ “gives some to be pastors and some to be teachers, until all the elect of God are brought unto unity of the faith.”<sup>52</sup>

Second, Christ equips ministers with spiritual gifts enabling them to exercise the office of ministry for the edification of the church. Owen says, “*Gifts make no man a minister; but all the world cannot make a minister of Christ without gifts (emphasis Owen).*”<sup>53</sup>

Third, Christ grants to the church the *authority or power* to call spiritually equipped men to the office of minister.<sup>54</sup> Regarding this power, however, the following

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<sup>49</sup> *Works*, 9:432.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin recognizes the place of ministers in Christ’s absence when he says, “Nevertheless, because he does not dwell among us in a visible presence [Matt. 26:11], we have said that he uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth, as a sort of delegated work, not by transferring to them his right and honor, but only that through their mouths he may do his own work—just as a workman uses a tool to do his work.” *Institutes*, 4.3.1.

<sup>51</sup> *Works*, 9:432.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*; Cf. *Works*, 4:494. The topic of spiritual gifts will be developed below under the heading: “The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Ministry.”

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:433.

must be clear. This power consists “in an absolute compliance with the command of Christ.” It is not a despotic or coercive power. Furthermore, the church has no power to call a minister whom Christ has not previously called and spiritually equipped. Owen says, “No church can make a man *formally* a minister, that Christ hath not made so *materially*.” For Owen, two things must be present working in concert: the law of Christ as the foundation and the preparative gifts of Christ in the minister. He says, “Because he gave the law of the office, and because he gave these gifts to the officers, therefore are they constituted by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>55</sup> Finally, the means by which the Lord appoints a minister to the ministerial office is through congregational choice by election. It is an inviolable right of a congregation to choose their own pastors and not have them force upon them. Owen admonishes the congregation:

It is the great work you have to do, let me tell you of this church, in your calling of an officer, to give up yourselves unto him by the will of God, to be led, guided, instructed, directed,—to have the work of the ministry fulfilled among you to your edification; and this submission wherein...the essence of the call doth consist, is to be testified by suffrage or by choice.<sup>56</sup>

Owen notes as many as thirteen references that occur in the New Testament concerning a minister’s call.<sup>57</sup> However, he insists, “We may freely say, there is no one instance to be found in the whole New Testament concerning the practical part of communicating an office unto any person, but it is peculiarly also declared that it was done by the election of the multitude, or the body of Christ.”<sup>58</sup>

Fourth, a minister prepared by Christ and duly elected by a congregation is to be set apart by fasting and prayer (Acts 14:23; 13:3). Owen summarizes the four means through which Christ brings ministers to his church:

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<sup>55</sup> *Works*, 9:433.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:434; Owen discusses Acts 1:15, Acts 6:1-5; Acts 14:23.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:435.

These, then, are the four ways to answer that great inquiry, How doth Christ continue to give ministers unto the church? [1] He doth it by his law constituting the office,—the law in the gospel, which is an everlasting ordinance;—[2] he doth it by his Spirit, communicating gifts unto persons;—[3] he doth it by his church calling of them, and by a submission to them according to the will of God, and testifying that submission by their suffrage;—[4] he doth it by his ordinance of solemnly setting them apart with fasting and prayer.<sup>59</sup>

Owen furthermore discusses two implications which arise from his view that both minister and ministry are gifts of Christ. First, any office in the church not appointed by Christ is nullified for lack of authority. He has in mind the Roman Church with such offices as pope, cardinal, metropolitan, and diocesans. He says, “All the outward order and solemnity in the world, and all the holiness of persons, when engaging in such an office, cannot give it a right and title; because it wants the law of Christ for its foundation.”<sup>60</sup>

Second, if the minister *is* a gift of Christ to his church, then the church must receive him as such and the minister must conduct himself as such. This requires wisdom and prudence. Owen says, “When we receive so great a gift from Christ, he expects that it be valued, that it be thankfully received, and that it be duly improved.”<sup>61</sup> A minister’s demeanor must reflect that dignity he possesses as the gift of Christ. He is to ask, “How shall I approve myself, so as to be looked on as a gift from Christ given unto his church?”<sup>62</sup> Owen discusses three things that are required. First, a minister as a shepherd must *imitate* Christ in his meekness, care, and tenderness toward the flock (Isa. 60:11).

Owen explains what he calls “the great pattern”:

Here is the example for all who are shepherds of the flock under Christ (who intend to give an account with comfort unto the great shepherd of the sheep, when he shall appear at the last day),—in meekness and condescension giving out help and assistance, bear

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<sup>59</sup> *Works*, 9:435.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:436.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

with all things, that cannot particularly be insisted upon; and especially conforming unto him who knows how to have compassion on the ignorant, and them that are out of the way.<sup>63</sup>

Second, he is to *represent* Christ in his offices of king, prophet, and priest.<sup>64</sup> As ruler in the church, he must be “sensible that the government of Christ be spiritual and holy.”

Owen recalls the travesty of men who “rule the church of God with rods and axes, with fire and fagot!” He asks, “Is this to represent the meek and holy King of the Church, or rather a devouring tyrant, unto the world?” As a prophet, the minister is the “great teacher of the church.” This Owen regards as the “principle work” of a minister. For Owen, to neglect this work is to “renounce Jesus Christ.” As a “priest”, the minister is “to make continual prayers and intercessions for the church.” Owen says, “It is a great work thus, in all these things, to represent Christ in all his offices unto the church; and indeed, who is sufficient for these things?”<sup>65</sup> Third, a minister is to exude *zeal* for Christ.<sup>66</sup> As the Lord’s ambassador he will have zeal for the Lord’s interests—“for his worship, for the purity of his ordinances, for the conversion of souls, and for the building up of the saints.”<sup>67</sup>

### ***The Ministry the Fruit of Christ’s Mediation***

On the basis of Ephesians 4:8-9 and Psalm 68:17-18, Owen argues that the Lord’s gift of the ministry to the church is a glorious and eminent fruit of the mediation of Christ. This is true with regard to both his exaltation and his humiliation.<sup>68</sup> For Owen, the ascension of Christ was the “great preparation” preceding the giving of ministerial gifts to the church. Accordingly, Owen quotes the apostle, “He ascended on high...and

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<sup>63</sup> *Works*, 9:437.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:437.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:438.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

gave gifts to men.” He insists these gifts are nothing more “than the giving of ministers unto the church.” Owen regards the simplicity of this gift of greater moment than all the pomp and regalia associated with Roman ceremonies. He says, “*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 theatre of glory in the communication of this office and these officers (emphasis Owen).*”<sup>69</sup> For Owen the true glory of the office is not to be seen in the outward accouterments of religious ceremony, but in the unpretentious approbation of Christ upon him who is set apart by prayer and fasting. In reality, according to Owen, such an occasion is joined by the holy and elect angels because “they are present as witnesses in the collation of authority from Christ.” He continues, “Thou hast thousands of witnesses more than thou seest; there are more eyes upon thee than thou takest notice of;—God is present, Christ is present, the elect angels are present....Here then is glory and beauty, in that it is not only a gift, but an eminent gift.”<sup>70</sup>

The ministry likewise springs from its *foundation* in the humiliation and death of Christ.<sup>71</sup> Owen sees Paul’s reference to Christ’s descending into the lower parts of the earth (Eph. 4:9) as referring to either his incarnation or his burial in the grave. For Owen, “the death of Christ hath a great influence into this gift of the ministry.”<sup>72</sup> He regards it as “a branch that grew out of the grave of Christ” and says, “Let it be esteemed as lightly

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<sup>69</sup> *Works*, 9:439.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:440.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:440-441.

as men please, had not Christ died for it, we had not had a ministry in the world.”<sup>73</sup> The ministry relates to the death of Christ in two ways. First, Christ was exalted to his mediatorial authority by virtue of his death. Second, the purpose of the ministry is to proclaim that peace purchased in Christ’s death. Owen asks:

How did Christ come and preach peace to the Gentiles,—to them that were afar off? It was no otherwise than by instituting the office of the ministry, and sending his ministers to preach peace to them. And we that are ministers may know the near relation of our office to the death of Christ, which will greatly direct us in the work we have to do; which is, I say, to preach that peace that was made with God by Christ.<sup>74</sup>

### **The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian Ministry**

If the minister and his office are the gifts of Christ to his church, the endowment of the Holy Spirit is Christ’s gift to his minister. Sinclair Ferguson says of Owen’s view of the ministry that “a divine *grace-gift* is a necessary prerequisite for every stated office in the church.”<sup>75</sup> To repeat the *Confession of Faith*, it states, “Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and *doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto (emphasis mine)*.”<sup>76</sup> Packer makes an important observation concerning the Holy Spirit’s role in the Christian ministry as understood by the Puritans:

To many Christians today, the phrase ‘spiritual gifts’ suggests a wider range of questions and concerns than it did to the Puritans. . . . Puritan attention when discussing gifts was dominated by their interest in the ordained ministry, and hence in those particular gifts which qualify a man for ministerial office, and questions about other gifts to other persons were rarely raised. Preoccupied as they were—and as their times required them to be—with securing high standards in the ministry, and educating layfolk out of superstition and fanaticism, the Puritans had both their minds and their hands full, and modern questions about layman’s gifts. . . . were given less of an airing.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *Works*, 9:441.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 201.

<sup>76</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 25.3.

<sup>77</sup> Packer, 226.

Owen's second ordination sermon, dated April 3, 1678, is taken from 1 Corinthians 12:11. It follows closely the content of chapter seven in Owen's *Discourse of Spiritual Gifts*;<sup>78</sup> a work in which Packer says "the official ministry is central in Owen's interest."<sup>79</sup> Owen calls the Spirit's endowments upon a minister "the foundation of all our station, work, and duty,"<sup>80</sup> and warns that a "ministry devoid of spiritual gifts is a sufficient evidence of a Church under a degenerating apostasy."<sup>81</sup> Owen's stated purpose in his sermon is to demonstrate "that it is the work of the Spirit of God, in all ages of the church, to communicate spiritual gifts and abilities to those who are called according unto his mind to the ministry of the church, to enable them unto all evangelical administrations, to his glory, and the edification of the church."<sup>82</sup> He notes by way of introduction that spiritual gifts are not merely natural or acquired abilities, but spiritual endowments for the glory of God and the good of the church; and that such gifts are the crux of the ministerial call, the demonstration of which are required before a minister is formally called to office. These ideas are developed more fully in his *Discourse*.

### ***The Holy Spirit Foundational to the Church***

Owen presents his theme of spiritual gifts for the ministerial office under eight headings. The first five heads regard the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in general as foundational for the heart of his discussion on a spiritually gifted ministry presented in the latter three. First, the Scriptures teach that Christ has promised to be present with his church throughout all ages (Matt. 28:20). This is essentially what distinguishes a church

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<sup>78</sup> *Works*, 4:498-508.

<sup>79</sup> Packer, 226.

<sup>80</sup> *Work*, 9:441.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:482.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:442.

from any other society. A church may flaunt expansive organization or boast impressive authority. However, Owens say, “If Christ be not present with them...they have no gospel church” because it lacks its vital foundation. As the tabernacle and the temple were nothing until “the glory of God entered,...they would be not churches of Christ, unless *the glory of Christ* enter into them.”<sup>83</sup> Second, Christ’s presence with his church is primarily through his Spirit. This promise, Owen points out, does not concern “the immensity of his divine nature”,<sup>84</sup> whereby he is omnipresent, or the temporary presence of his human nature with his disciples on earth. Rather it concerns the promised Holy Spirit to continually “supply the presence”<sup>85</sup> of Christ to his church after he was taken up into glory, of which John 14-16 speak. Owen says, “Christ hath no vicar, but the Spirit” and insists that it has been “the faith of the *catholic church*, from the first foundation of it, that the promised presence of Christ with his church was *by his Spirit*.”<sup>86</sup> Third, the promise of the Holy Spirit is given to the church in an everlasting covenant (Isa. 59:20-21). For Owen this is a great surety to a gospel church for the covenant promise of Christ and his word are established and made certain by the Holy Spirit who is promised “in the same covenant.”<sup>87</sup> Fourth, the ministry of the gospel is consequently the ministry of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6-8). For Owen, the Spirit must either be regarded as the cause or the effect of the ministry. In the former, it concerns the Spirit giving spiritual gifts. In the latter, it concerns the Spirit communicating himself (Gal. 3:2). Either way, for Owen it makes his point: “If you take the Spirit to be the efficient of the ministration of the church, enabling its ministers to perform their work, or for the effect of the

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<sup>83</sup> *Works*, 9:443.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:500.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:444.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:444.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:445.

ministration,—he is to abide with the church for ever (sic).”<sup>88</sup> Fifth, the Holy Spirit is necessary for the very existence of the church. Owen argues that without Christ as the foundation, or faith in his promise, the church cannot exist (Matt. 16:18). He says the promise of Christ must be mixed with faith “which we cannot do, unless there be some ground for the infallible accomplishment of it [which]...must depend upon *the work of God*.”<sup>89</sup> Thus Owen insists, “No church would have a relation unto Jesus Christ as the mystical head, if God should cease to communicate the Spirit as to gifts.”<sup>90</sup>

### ***The Necessity of the Spirit’s Work to the Ministry***

With the doctrine of the Holy Spirit set forth as a foundation, Owen explores the Spirit’s work in granting spiritual gifts for the ministry. The sixth head concerns “the communication of such gifts unto the ordinary ministry of the church.”<sup>91</sup> Owen says:

The Holy Ghost thus promised, thus sent, thus given, doth furnish the ministers of the gospel, according to his mind, with spiritual abilities in the discharge of their work; and without it they are no way fitted for nor able to it,—no way accepted with Christ in what they do, nor can give any faithful account of what they undertake.<sup>92</sup>

The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30, for Owen, is paradigmatic of the whole nature of the ministerial work. In it, he says, “You have an account there given of the continuance of the church, the kingdom of Christ, in the world to the end of it.”<sup>93</sup> It pictures the great Lord departing and leaving his affairs in the hands of his servants who have been given various “talents” with which to trade. In his *Discourse*, Owen explains,

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<sup>88</sup> *Works*, 9:446.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:446-447.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:447.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:504.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:447.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:448.

“The trade they had to drive was that of the administration of the gospel, its doctrine, worship, and ordinances, to others.”<sup>94</sup> For Owen, the parable teaches three things:

1. That wherever Jesus Christ calls and appoints a minister in his house, for the building work of it, he gives him spiritual abilities to do that work by the Holy Ghost. He sets none at work in his house, he went away, but he gave them talents. 2. For men to take upon them to serve Christ as officers in the work of his house, who have received not of these spiritual abilities to work with, is a high presumption, and casts reflection of dishonor on Jesus Christ; as if he called to work and gave not strength; as though he called to trade, and gave not stock; or required spiritual duties, and gave not spiritual abilities....3. This is plain in the parable, also, that those who have received talents, or spiritual gifts and abilities of the Holy Ghost, they are to trade with them. And I do not know a warning that I judge more necessary to be given those who are called this day, than to charge them not to trade too much with their natural talents, and abilities, and learning. These are talents in their kind; but it is the Spirit must manage all that learning they have, or it will prejudice them and you also. *I have known some good men have been so addicted to their study, that they have thought the last day of the week sufficient to prepare for their ministry, though they employ all the rest of the week in other studies.* But your great business is, to trade with your *spiritual* abilities.<sup>95</sup>

Owen continues his discussion of spiritual gifts by making three observations from Romans 12:4-8. He believes that the ordinary state of the church through the ages is in view in these verses. He says that spiritual gifts “are the foundation of all church work, whether it be in office or out of office.”<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, “Spiritual gifts are the foundation of office, which is the foundation of work in the church, and of all gospel administrations in a special manner, according to the gifts received.”<sup>97</sup> Finally, the Holy Spirit supplies gifts to his ministers, but he also supplies the *measure* of gifts. He says, “The gifts of the Holy Ghost are not only for work, but, I say, for the measure of work, Eph. iv. 8-13.”<sup>98</sup>

Seventh, a spiritually gifted ministry is necessary for the growth of the church and the advance of the gospel. The ministry of the gospel *is* a ministry of the Spirit. If the

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<sup>94</sup> *Works*, 4:504.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:448.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:449.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

church could flourish by purely human means or “carnal ordinances” there would be no need for a Spiritual ministry. Owen says, “*Spiritual gifts and spiritual administrations live and die together.*”<sup>99</sup> He believes the apostasy of the “primitive church” had to do with the “neglect and contempt of spiritual gifts.” He explains, “Men’s hearts waxing carnal, they grew weary of spiritual things; they did not care to wait upon Christ for supplies of grace and gifts of the Spirit.”<sup>100</sup> Without the soil of the Spirit, gifts will not flourish in the life of the minister. When the church grows “weary of gospel ministrations” it turns to carnal means to advance its interests. In Puritan fashion, Owen sees an example of this carnality and consequent apostasy in the Church of Rome. But it is likely that he would include the Anglican Church as well with its persistent attempts to force compliance with religious ceremonies not grounded in Scripture:

They found out imaginations suited to their inclination; they will have prayer-books read, ceremonies to perform, and a number of inventions to keep up a form of worship without those spiritual gifts. We have an instance in the church of Rome. What various extravagant things they have done to make an outward show, when they had lost spiritual gifts! All forms of worship are nothing but to keep an outward appearance. They did not like to retain these gifts in their minds, whereby alone spiritual worship is to be administered. The principle of apostasy of all churches in the world is, from a weariness of serving God by the aid and assistance of the Spirit.<sup>101</sup>

Owen’s eighth and final point is that experience teaches the doctrine he has expounded. He asks directly, “Have you had no experience of those ministrations? Have you never found in the administrations of those whom God hath called to go before you, evidences of the presence of Christ by his Spirit, in the communications of gifts to them, to make them effectual to your edification and consolation? Have you not had a *proof of the Spirit of Christ speaking in them?* 2 Cor. xiii. 3.”<sup>102</sup> For Owen, experience proves the

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<sup>99</sup> *Works*, 9:449.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:450.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:450.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

certainty that “where the gifts of the Spirit of God...are lost or neglected, Christ is also, the Spirit of God is so also, and all the benefits of the gospel will be so too.”<sup>103</sup>

By way of conclusion, Owen offers several exhortations to those called to the work of the ministry. He recognizes the ministry is a *glorious* work as is fitting under the new covenant (2 Cor. 3). Furthermore, spiritually gifted ministry is the *effective* work for building the church of Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:8) and thus it is to be supported by the prayers of God’s people. However, Owen stresses most of all that the ministry is a *difficult* work. Owen regards a carnal ministry of “altars and services”, born of “natural endowments and abilities”, to be “easier than any trade.”<sup>104</sup> But for those ministering from genuine spiritual gifts, a minister must endeavor to maintain his rootedness in the soil of the Holy Spirit. Owen exhorts:

If grace decays in our hearts, a ministry in gifts will grow burdensome and displeasing to ourselves, as well as useless to the congregations. We must look to the soil, or it will be of no advantage that we have this ministry committed to us....If you have undertaken the work of the ministry, you must be meditating on it. Unless you are in these things continually, you will not make faithful dispensers of the word. A man may preach a very good sermon...but he will never make a good minister of Jesus Christ, whose heart and mind is not always in the work. Spiritual gifts will require continual ruminating on the things of the gospel in our minds; which makes it a difficult ministry, that our hearts and mind may be cast into the mould and form of those things which we are to deliver to others. And it is surprising how a little necessary diversion will unfit the mind for this work.<sup>105</sup>

### **The Role of the Pastor in the Christian Ministry**

In Owen’s view of the ministry, the minister is endowed with gifts by the Holy Spirit and offered to the church as a gift of Christ. This gift becomes apparent as he fulfills those duties for which God has called and equipped him. Lewis recognizes the importance Puritans in general placed on the pastoral office:

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<sup>103</sup> *Works*, 9:451.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:451.

Provocative as it may appear, it must be said that among the Puritans of sixteenth and seventeenth century England, pastoral work was not the light and uncertain thing which it has largely become in our own day. Pastoral visitation was not regarded as something conventional or socially desirable, but was regarded as a matter of sacred and downright *business*. For the most part, the Puritan pastor exercised his pastoral function in four ways, viz.—catechizing, counseling, comforting and sharing with his people times of special private worship.<sup>106</sup>

Owen sets forth in several places what he regards as the duties of the ministry. In the ordination sermon, *Duties of a Pastor*, dated September 8, 1682, he explores in detail the ministry of the word, prayer, defending the truth, and laboring for the conversion of souls. He lists, but does not develop, the administration of the sacraments, cases of conscience, ruling in the church, maintaining an exemplary character, and interchurch relations. In chapter five of *True Nature of a Gospel Church*,<sup>107</sup> he discusses in some detail the above duties, but adds compassionate suffering with the flock, and care of the poor and visitation of the sick. Whether Owen intended an order of priority in his listing of duties is not stated. However, it is clear that he regarded feeding the flock as the minister's primary task.<sup>108</sup> In chapter eight of his *Discourse*<sup>109</sup> he adds considerably to the thoughts he summarizes in his final ordination sermon. In keeping with the scope of this essay, this section will present only those four duties Owen advanced in his sermon.

### ***The Minister as Prophet***

Owen had previously stated that the minister was to “represent Christ in his prophetic office” as “the great teacher of the church.” He insisted, “The principle work

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<sup>106</sup> Lewis, 63.

<sup>107</sup> *Works*, 16:74-96.

<sup>108</sup> Leland Ryken says, “The Puritans were unanimous in saying that the pastor’s primary task was preaching.” Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: They Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 93; Owen believed that “the first and principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by diligent preaching of the word.” *Works*, 16:74.

<sup>109</sup> See especially *Works*, 4:508-514.

of a minister is, ‘to preach the word in season and out of season.’”<sup>110</sup> For Owen, feeding the flock with knowledge and understanding is the minister’s first duty.<sup>111</sup> He says, “He is no pastor who doth not feed his flock.”<sup>112</sup> This is not an occasional matter for the minister, for he is to give himself “continually to the word” (Acts 6:4), laboring in both word and doctrine (1 Tim. 5:17). He is “to make all things subservient to this work of preaching and instructing the church”<sup>113</sup> (Col. 1:28-29). Owen discusses five requirements for those engaging in this work of feeding the flock.

First, *spiritual wisdom* is required in order to understand and proclaim the mysteries of the gospel. Owen says, “We must labour ourselves to have a thorough knowledge of these mysteries, or we shall be useless to a great part of the church.”<sup>114</sup> In his *Discourse*, Owen chides those who believe a “cursory perusal of a few books” is sufficient to acquire such wisdom. He rather has in mind the following:

Such a comprehension of the scope and end of the Scripture, of the revelation of God therein; such an acquaintance with the systems of particular doctrinal truths, in their rise, tendency, and use; such a habit of mind in judging of spiritual things, and comparing them one with another; such a distinct insight into the springs and course of the mystery of the love, grace, and will of God in Christ,—as enables them in whom it is to declare the counsel of God, to make known the way of life, faith and obedience, unto others, and to instruct them in their whole duty to God and man thereon.<sup>115</sup>

For Owen, the gospel is the very “wisdom of God in a mystery” (1 Cor. 2:7) such that ministers are obligated “to become so wise and understanding in that mystery as that they

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<sup>110</sup> *Works*, 9:437.

<sup>111</sup> According to Peter Lewis, “It has been observed that the tension between Anglican and Puritan modes and ideals of worship arose largely from the difference between the Anglican conception of public worship as fundamentally a priestly act, and the Puritan idea of it as fundamentally a prophetic one. To the Puritan mind the priestly element in worship rested on the two great truths of Christ’s perpetual High Priesthood and the consequent priesthood of all believers. Thus, any mediation of grace through the minister was not through any supposed priestly act of his, but through the Word of Christ spoken by him in the Spirit of Christ to the people of Christ. In public worship, therefore, the Puritan conceived of the prophetic element as the grand climactic and dominating factor.” See Lewis, 53.

<sup>112</sup> *Works*, 9:453.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Works*, 9:454.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:509.

may be able to declare it unto others.”<sup>116</sup> The ability to apprehend such things is part and parcel to the spiritual giftedness and preparation incumbent upon his call. Owen says, “Where this is not in some measure [present], to look for a ministry is to look for the living among the dead.”<sup>117</sup>

The second requirement is *authority* which Owen regards as “a consequent of unction, and not office.”<sup>118</sup> As an example Owen points out that the scribes had an office to teach, but no unction. Christ, on the other hand, had no office but “a full unction of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>119</sup> The authority of office alone is insufficient if not accompanied by the Spirit’s unction upon a minister. Again, in his *Discourse*, Owen discusses the gift of utterance as belonging to the ministerial call. He is not speaking of such things as “natural volubility of speech” or “rhetorical ability.” Preaching for Owen is not “a foolish affectation of words, in supposed elegancies of speech, quaint expressions”,<sup>120</sup> and the like. The true gift of utterance lends itself to preaching with authority because it is characterized by freedom in declaring truth, boldness and confidence amidst difficulties, and gravity in expression as becoming the “sacred mysteries of Christ and his truths.”<sup>121</sup> Such authority must accompany the “delivery of the word” for this is necessary “that the hearers may receive the word, ‘not as the word of man, but, as it is in truth, the word of God.’”<sup>122</sup>

The third requirement for those feeding the flock is *experience* of things preached to others. Owen is often quoted in this regard:

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<sup>116</sup> *Works*, 4:509.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:510.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:454.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:455.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:512.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:512.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:513.

I think, truly, *that no man preaches that sermon well to others that doth not first preach it to his own heart.* He who doth not feed on, and digest, and thrive by, what he prepares for his people, he may give poison, as far as he knows; for, unless he finds the power of it in his own heart, he cannot have any ground of confidence that it will have power in the hearts of others. *It is an easier thing to bring our heads to preach than our hearts to preach.*<sup>123</sup>

A minister must seek to be “transformed” by the power of the truths he preaches. Owen says, “A man may preach every day of the week, and not have his heart engaged once.

This hath lost us powerful preaching in the world, and set up, instead of it, quaint orations; for such men never seek after experience in their own hearts.” Such preaching, says Owen, has “lost us the power of what we call the ministry.”<sup>124</sup>

The fourth requirement for feeding the flock concerns *skill* in dividing the Scriptures correctly, which in effect is the application of practical wisdom. Closely related is the fifth requirement of *knowledge* and consideration of the state of the flock. Owen says, “He who hath not the state of his flock continually in his eye, and in his mind, in his work of preaching, fights uncertainty, as a man beating the air.” A minister who never considers his congregation’s peculiar temptations, strength and weaknesses, highs and lows, level of knowledge and maturity, etc., “never preaches aright unto them.”<sup>125</sup> Owen expounds upon these two requirements in his *Discourse* as he explores the doctrine of the gospel as “the principle work of the ministry.”<sup>126</sup> He says that it is incumbent upon the minister to divide the word aright which is a spiritual gift (2 Tim.

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<sup>123</sup> *Works*, 9:455; Puritan minister and Owen contemporary John Flavel (1628-1691) speaks in a similar vein when he says, “Ministerial prudence will shew us, of what great use our own affections are, for the moving of others; and will therefore advise us, That, as ever we expect the truths we preach should operate upon the hearts of others, we first labour to work them in upon our own hearts.” See John Flavel, “The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor,” in *The Works of John Flavel* (1820, repr., Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 6:572-573.

<sup>124</sup> *Works*, 9:455.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:456.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:508.

2:15).<sup>127</sup> Owen sketches the various components that are necessary for that skill of rightly dividing the word of truth:

(1.) A sound judgment in general concerning the state and condition of those unto whom any one is so dispensing the word. It is the duty of a shepherd to know the state of his flock; and unless he do so he will never feed them profitably. He must know whether they are babes, or young men, or old; whether they need milk or strong meat; whether they are skilful or unskillful in the word of righteousness; whether they have their senses exercised to discern good and evil, or not; or whether his hearers are mixed with all these sorts;—whether, in the judgment of charity, they are converted unto God, or are yet in an unregenerate condition;—what probably are their principle temptations, their hindrances and furtherances; what is their growth or decay in religion....(2.) An acquaintance with the ways and methods of the work of God’s grace on the minds and hearts of men, that he may pursue and comply with its design in the ministry of the word. Nothing is by many more despised than an understanding hereof; yet is nothing more necessary to the work of the ministry....He, therefore, who is unacquainted with the ordinary methods of the operation of grace fights uncertainty in his preaching of the word, like a man beating the air....(3.) An acquaintance with the nature of temptation, with the especial hindrances of faith and obedience, what may befall those unto whom the word is dispensed, is in like manner required hereunto. Many things might be added on this head, seeing a principal part of ministerial skill doth consist here. (4.) A right understanding of the nature of spiritual diseases, distempers, and sicknesses, with their proper cures and remedies, belongeth hereunto. For the want hereof the hearts of the wicked are oftentimes made glad in the preaching of the word, and those of the righteous filled with sorrow; the hands of sinners are strengthened, and those who are looking towards God are discouraged or turned out of the way. And where men either know not these things, or do not or cannot apply themselves skillfully to distribute the word according to this variety of occasion, they cannot give the household its portion of meat in due season.<sup>128</sup>

Although this eloquent description captures the heart of Owen’s view of ministry, it is also shared by Puritans in general. Lewis says:

The Puritans never recognized a spiritual malady in Christian experience that was not to some extent, and at some stage, curable. They insisted that spiritual depressions and desertions could be, and should be in great measure, alleviated by sound counsel wisely applied and properly taken, and that it was a major part of ministerial faithfulness for the pastor to be able to give such counsel.<sup>129</sup>

J. I. Packer’s admonition concerning this ministerial vision is worth noting. He says,

“The question of the best syllabus of study for ministerial candidates is often discussed

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<sup>127</sup> *Works*, 4:510.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:510-511.

<sup>129</sup> Lewis, 104.

today. Would it not be in our interest to reconsider this syllabus of Owen's? How dare we, in this or any age, contemplate ordaining men who have not first mastered it?"<sup>130</sup>

The final requirement Owen notes is *zeal* for the glory of God, along with *compassion* for the souls of men. In *True Nature* Owen emphasizes that all the forgoing requirements are to be "constantly accompanied with evidence" of such zeal and compassion. He insists, "Where these are not in vigorous exercise in the minds and souls of them that preach the word, giving a demonstration of themselves unto the consciences of them that hear, the quickening form, the life and soul of preaching, is lost."<sup>131</sup> Owen's own zeal for preaching is expressed as he summarizes his exposition on the minister's duty to feed the flock:

When men undertake the pastoral office, and either judge it not their duty to preach, or are not able to do so, or attempt it only at some solemn seasons, or attend unto it as a task required of them, without that wisdom, skill, diligence, care, prudence, zeal, and compassion, which are required thereunto, the glory and use of the ministry will be utterly destroyed.<sup>132</sup>

### ***The Minister as Priest***

The second ministerial duty Owen addresses is the imitation of Christ in his "sacerdotal" or priestly office. In other words, the minister is "to make continual prayers and intercession for the church" (Col. 4:12).<sup>133</sup> In his third ordination sermon he addresses first the reasons why a minister ought to prayer and then the things for which he is to pray.

The minister must continually pray for his flock. In so doing he provides evidence to his own soul that he *is* a conscientious servant of the church. Owen says, "Let him

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<sup>130</sup> Packer, 228.

<sup>131</sup> *Works*, 16:77.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:437.

preach as much as he will, visit as much as he will, speak as much as he will, unless God doth keep up in him *a spirit of prayer* in his closet and family for them, he can have no evidence that he doth perform any other ministerial duty in a due manner, or that what he doth is accepted by God.”<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, prayer is the means by which a minister blesses his congregation. This is distinguished from formal benedictions which are only declarative in nature. But in continual praying, ministers bring real blessing upon their flocks.<sup>135</sup> Again, Owen insists that prayer is the only means by which a minister can “keep up a due love to his church.” He explains that a minister will often endure such severe mistreatment from the very flock he serves, that without continual prayer for them “nothing can keep up his heart with inflamed love towards them.”<sup>136</sup> Finally, through prayer, Owen says, “*God will teach us what we shall preach* unto them.”<sup>137</sup> He admits that a minister cannot pray for his flock without also pondering the things for which he is to pray. He says, “The more we pray for our people, the better shall we be instructed what to preach to them.”<sup>138</sup> He points out from Acts 6:4 that prayer was mentioned before preaching.

Owen discusses several things for which a minister is to pray. First and foremost he is to intercede for the success of the ministry of the word with regard to all its intended outcomes. Owen lists such outcomes among believers as living unto God, direction in duty, instruction in truth, growth in grace, and enjoyment in the Lord. He says, “We should pray that all these ends may be accomplished in our congregations...or else we sow seed at random” for “unless there come showers of the Spirit upon them, there will

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<sup>134</sup> *Works*, 9:456.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:456-457.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 9: 457.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

be no profiting.”<sup>139</sup> Owen also insists that ministers pray for the presence of Christ in the sacred assemblies of the church. It is here that the promises and ordinances of the gospel are presented to the people of God. Their efficacy is depended not upon the piety or fervency of the minister, but entirely upon the presence of Christ. Owen says, “Make this your business, to pray mightily for it in the congregation, to make all these effectual.”<sup>140</sup> Ministers must, likewise, pray “with respect unto *the state and condition* of the church.” As ministers are knowledgeable regarding the peculiarities of their own congregations, Owen says:

And we ought to suit our prayers according to all we know concerning them, and be satisfied in it that Christ himself will come in to recover them who are fallen, to establish them who stand, to heal them who do backslide, to strengthen them who are tempted, to encourage them who are running and pressing forward to perfection, [and] to relieve them who are disconsolate in the dark.<sup>141</sup>

In *True Nature*, two additional prayer items are presented. Similar to that above Owen mentions prayer concerning the temptations to which the church is exposed and prayer for the preservation of faith, love, and fruitfulness. Lest any minister be mistaken regarding the central importance of prayer in the ministry, Owen insists on the following:

It were much to be desired that all those who take upon them this pastoral office did well consider and understand how great and necessary a part of their work and duty doth consist in their continual fervent prayer for their flocks; for besides that it is the only instituted way whereby they may, by virtue of their office, bless their congregations, so will they find their hearts and minds, in and by the discharge of it, more and more filled with love, and engaged with diligence unto all other duties of their office, and excited unto the exercise of all grace towards the whole church on all occasions. And where any are negligent herein, there is no duty which they perform towards the church but it is influenced with false considerations, and will not hold weight in the balance of the sanctuary.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> *Works*, 9:457.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:458.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 16:78-79.

### *The Minister as Champion*

A pastor's third duty is that of defender of truth.<sup>143</sup> In this respect Owen says, "It is incumbent on men who are pastors and teachers of churches, to preserve the truth and doctrine of the gospel, that is committed to the church,—to keep it entire, and defend it against all opposition."<sup>144</sup> For Owen the gospel is an entrusted deposit for which a minister is responsible to keep safe (1 Tim. 1:11; 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:14). He regards the church as "the ground and pillar of truth, to hold up and declare truth, in and by its ministers", whom he views as "shields and bucklers to defend the truth against all adversaries and opposers" (Cant. 4:4).<sup>145</sup> The church can be thankful for an array of such champions throughout history "else the truth had been lost." Owen insists, "They are not only to *declare* it in the preaching of the gospel; but to *defend* and preserve it against all opposition,—to hold up the shield and buckler of faith against all opposers."<sup>146</sup>

Such duty comes with several requirements. First, ministers must possess a *clear apprehension* of those doctrines and truths in need of defense. Owen says, "Truth may be lost by weakness as well as wickedness." Diligent prayer and study are required in order to "stop the mouth of the gainsayers."<sup>147</sup> Second, a minister must have a *love of the truth*. Unless such truth is valued by virtue of its experience in the soul, it is likely that a pastor will "never contend earnestly for the truth." Owen says, "I fear there is much loss of truth, not for want of light, knowledge, and ability, but *for want of love*."<sup>148</sup> Some of the doctrines of which Owen speaks are listed as eternal predestination, efficacious grace,

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<sup>143</sup> In *True Nature* Owen lists the "seals of the covenant" or the sacraments as the third duty followed by preserving the truth. To be sure, Owen held the sacraments in high esteem. See Owen, *Works*, 16:79 and Jon D. Payne, *John Owen on the Lord's Supper* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004).

<sup>144</sup> *Works*, 9:458.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:459.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

and reprobation of the wicked—doctrines particularly assaulted by the Arminians with whom Owen contested most of his life. He warns, “We scarce hear one word of them; we are almost ashamed to mention them in the church; and he that doth it will be sure to expose himself to public obloquy and scorn: but we must not be ashamed of truth.”<sup>149</sup> In the *True Nature* he insists, “Unless we look on truth as a pearl, as that which is valued at any rate, bought with any price, as that which is better than all the world, we shall not endeavour its preservation with that diligence which is required.”<sup>150</sup> Third, ministers must be wary of *novel opinions*. Owen especially insists on maintaining “such points of faith” that previous generations found to be the source of “life, comfort, and power.” He says,

Who would have thought that we should have come to an indifferency as to the doctrine of justification, and quarrel and dispute about the interest of works in justification; about general redemption, which takes off the efficacy of the redeeming work of Christ; and about the perseverance of the saints; when these were the soul and life of them who are gone before us, who found the power and comfort of them? We shall not maintain these truths, unless we find the same comfort in them as they did.<sup>151</sup>

In addition to the above, Owen mentions in his *True Nature* four further requirements for defenders of the faith. Ministers must possess knowledge of opposing views, certainty of the most important truths of the gospel, and a determination to diligently watch over their own flocks. Nevertheless, these requirements find the greatest strength when exercised in concurrence with the church at large and in communion with others pastors and elders of a common confession. Owen provides council with regard to the church’s corporate defense of the faith:

It is evident what learning, labour, study, pains, ability, and exercise of the rational faculties, are ordinarily required unto the right discharge of these duties; and where men may be useful to the church in other things, but are defective in these, it becomes them to

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<sup>149</sup> *Works*, 9:459.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 16:82.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:459-460.

walk and act both circumspectly and humbly, frequently desiring and adhering unto the advices of them whom God hath intrusted with more talents and greater abilities.<sup>152</sup>

### *The Minister as Evangelist*

It is noteworthy that Owen discusses the duty of pastors to labor diligently for the conversion of souls toward the top of his list.<sup>153</sup> He did not believe in a post-apostolic *office* of evangelist, regarding it rather as an extraordinary office. He says that the “*power* that these officers in the church were intrusted with was extraordinary; for this is a certain consequent of an extraordinary call and extraordinary gifts.”<sup>154</sup> Like apostles, evangelists were commissioned to preach the gospel and confirm their doctrine with “*miraculous operations*, as occasion did require.” However, as distinct from the apostolic office, “They were employed in the settling and completing of those churches whose foundations were laid by the apostles.”<sup>155</sup> Apostles would preach and move on. Evangelist would build upon and solidify their work before the appointment of “*ordinary bishops, pastors, or teachers*” who would subsequently and more permanently feed and care for the flock under their charge. Even though Owen did not regard the office of evangelist as continuing beyond the apostolic age, he did maintain that the function of evangelist as a laborer for the conversion of souls was incumbent upon a pastor. He says in his *Discourse*:

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<sup>152</sup> *Works*, 16:83.

<sup>153</sup> Packer discusses and contrasts two prevailing views of evangelism. The older “Puritan” view of which Owen represents here is built upon the “conviction that *the conversion of a sinner is a gracious sovereign work of divine power*.” The “modern” type which today has largely supplanted this view was, according to Packer, “invented by Charles G. Finney in the 1820s” who insisted “that everyone is able to turn wholeheartedly to God once he or she is convinced that that is the right, proper, and needful thing to do.” Packer, 292-294; For Puritan Divine Thomas Watson, “Ministers knock at the door of men’s hearts, the Spirit comes with a key and opens the door.” Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity* (1890; repr., Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 221.

<sup>154</sup> *Works*, 4:446.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:447. Calvin similarly says regarding this office, “‘Evangelists’ I take to be those who, although lower in rank than apostles, were next to them in office and functioned in their place.” *Institutes*, 4.3.4.

It is true, those who are ordained ministers of the gospel, and others also that are the disciples of Christ, may and ought to preach the gospel to unconverted persons and nations as they have opportunity, and are particularly guided by the providence of God; but that any church or person as power or authority to ordain a person unto this office [of evangelist] and work cannot be proved.<sup>156</sup>

The *Confession of Faith* states that the purpose of the ministry along with the means of grace is “for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world.”<sup>157</sup> Similarly, Owen teaches that “particular churches” exists for the “calling and edification of the catholic church.” Consequently the Lord has appointed pastors as “the means of calling and gathering the elect in all ages: and this they principally are to do by their ministry.”<sup>158</sup>

Owen does not dispute the observation that there may be “occasional conversions” resulting from a variety of other means. But he regards the principle work for the conversion of souls to be “committed unto the pastors of churches.”<sup>159</sup> Owen argues that to both pastors and apostles were committed the task of preaching the gospel for the conversion of “infidels.” However, he insists their respective methods are different. Apostles were to preach the gospel for the conversion of souls and then teach the converted to observe the commands of Christ. Pastors, on the other hand are to teach and feed the flock, but not neglecting the work of evangelism.<sup>160</sup> Accordingly, says Owen, “After a man is called to be a pastor of a particular church, it is not his duty to leave that church, and go up and down to preach for the conversion of strangers.”<sup>161</sup> Where the world was the apostle’s primary interest, the “first object” of a pastoral

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<sup>156</sup> *Works*, 4:450.

<sup>157</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 25.3.

<sup>158</sup> *Works*, 9:460.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> See *Works*, 16:83-84.

<sup>161</sup> *Works*, 16:84; Again, Owen is in agreement with Calvin on this point. See the *Institutes*, 4.3.7.

ministry is the church—“to build up and edify the church.”<sup>162</sup> Nevertheless, Owen recognizes that pastors are afforded many opportunities for evangelistic preaching to which they must give attention. As examples he notes the pastor’s responsibility toward the potentially unconverted that come to his congregation as well as the opportunities he may have to preach “elsewhere.” Owen says, “They preach as ministers wherever they preach.”<sup>163</sup> In fact, Owen insists that it is the duty of churches “to part with their officers for a season, when called to preach in other places for the converting souls to Christ.”<sup>164</sup> That Owen regards this aspect of the ministry with high esteem is seen in his tribute to those who have most exemplified it: “The ministers who have been most celebrated, and that deservedly, in the last ages, in this and the neighbour nations, have been such as whose ministry God made eminently successful unto the conversions of souls.”<sup>165</sup>

### **John Owen and the Challenge of the Modern Pastor**

John Owen produced a massive theological anthology. Yet Sinclair Ferguson observes that he never wrote a systematic theology. According to Ferguson the reason is simple: “Owen’s interests were primarily pastoral rather than systematic. He was a theologian because he was a pastor. Consequently many of his lengthy works were called forth by circumstances in the church or the nation, and not because of a merely intellectual interest in theological systems.”<sup>166</sup>

This essay has explored the pastoral role of John Owen and sought to open his views on the Christian ministry, as seen primarily in his three ordination sermons.

Bunyan’s portrait of the “very grave person” hanging upon the wall is a window into the

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<sup>162</sup> *Works*, 9:461.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:461-462; See also *Works*, 16:85.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 16:85.

<sup>166</sup> Ferguson, 262.

Puritan vision of the Christian minister. Owen shared this vision. As discussed above, Owen would agree that the minister's "grave" carriage is born of the conviction that he sees himself and his office as Christ's gifts to the church, and that he is consequently endowed with spiritual gifts to function in that capacity. Because he serves the church as one who primarily proclaims the word of God, he is pictured with "the best of Books in his hand" and the law of truth "upon his lips". Because he intercedes before the throne of God in behalf of his flock, his eyes are viewed as "lifted up unto Heaven". Because he is the church's champion and defender of truth, he is seen with the world "behind his back". Because he is called to labor for the conversion of souls, he is portrayed as pleading with men and described as one who "can beget children, travail in birth with children, and nurse them himself when they are born."<sup>167</sup>

This vision of pastoral ministry is in jeopardy today. David Wells' masterful critique of the late twentieth-century church is beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless in *No Place for Truth* (1993), he addresses the marginalization of theology and the subsequent professionalization of the ministry in the world of "modernity". In such a world, says Wells, the "central function of the pastor has changed from that of truth broker to manager of the small enterprises we call churches...producing [what he calls] a new generation of pastoral disablers."<sup>168</sup> He discusses two prevailing models of ministry vying for ascendancy in contemporary Protestantism. He says:

In the one model, theology is foundational, and in the other it is only peripheral. In the one, theological truth explains why there is a ministry at all, what it is about, and why the Church without it will shrivel and die. In the other, this reasoning is marginalized so that what shapes, explains, and drives the work of ministry arises from the needs of a modern profession. And it is my contention that the presence of this latter model in the

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<sup>167</sup> Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, 25-26.

<sup>168</sup> David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 13.

Church goes a long way toward explaining the growing enfeeblement of the Church inwardly despite its outward growth. This model is ascending, even as the other is declining, and with its ascendancy the attacks upon theology grow more strident and the appetite for it diminishes.<sup>169</sup>

In short, Wells says, “The older role of the pastor as broker of truth has been eclipsed by the newer [model given to] managerial functions.”<sup>170</sup> The former model where theology is essential and central, according to Wells, “has its roots in the Reformation and in the Puritanism that followed”.<sup>171</sup> The later is a “psychological reaction to the growing irrelevance of ministers in society.”<sup>172</sup> Consequently the very theology that gives the ministry its “heart and fire” is displaced by a new emphasis on techniques and managerial competence.

Owen would agree with Wells’ critique. He was a pastor, not because he was a practitioner, but because he was a theologian. His view of the Christian ministry is not only theologically constructed; it arises from his theological understanding of the gospel as a son of the Reformation. In his commanding work on the *Holy Spirit*, Owen says:

For when God designed the great and glorious work of recovering fallen man and the saving of sinners, to the praise of the glory of his grace, he appointed, in his infinite wisdom, two great means thereof. The one was the giving of his Son for them, and the other was the giving of his Spirit unto them. And hereby was way made for the manifestation of the glory of the whole blessed Trinity; which is the utmost end of all the works of God.<sup>173</sup>

The ministry of the church accordingly concerns this double blessing.<sup>174</sup> It is first and foremost to teach, proclaim, announce, and hold forth the glory of Christ—his person and work—through his

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<sup>169</sup> Wells., 218-219.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 255. Wells cites Puritan and Owen contemporary Richard Baxter who says, “It is the first and great work of ministers of Christ to acquaint men with that God made them, and is their happiness: to open to them the treasures of His goodness, and to tell them of the glory that is in His presence, which all His chosen people shall enjoy....Have shewed them the right end, our next work is to acquaint them with the right means of attaining it.” See Wells, 218.

<sup>172</sup> Wells, 219.

<sup>173</sup> *Works*, 3:23.

<sup>174</sup> Calvin says, “Christ was give to us by God’s generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ’s blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ’s spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.” *Institutes*, iii.xi.1; See also R. Scott Clark, *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant: The Double Benefit of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2005).

justifying grace and forgiveness of sins, to the gathering of the elect and the building up of the church. Second, it is to trust the powerful, prevailing, efficacious, and irresistible work of the Holy Spirit to accomplish and apply these gracious benefits for the regeneration and sanctification of the elect. Owen's view of the Christian ministry is consistent with his theology of grace. When the church wanes on the sufficiency of the work of Christ and the necessity of the work of God's Spirit, it soon loses confidence in the effective means God has appointed to accomplish these ends. Ministry then mutates into a menagerie of techniques designed to supplement or replace the Holy Spirit's work. Owen would have called the outcome "apostasy."<sup>175</sup>

In Owen's treatment of the Christian ministry, his primary interest was the *pastoral* ministry in the church. As Packer intimates, Owen, along with Puritans in general, did not give nearly as much attention to spiritual gifts among the laity as he did to the application of spiritual gifts for the pastoral office.<sup>176</sup> Perhaps also he was too reluctant to view the work of evangelism as extending beyond that of the ordinary ministry of the church.<sup>177</sup> Despite these shortcomings, Owen's view of the Christian ministry is sound and in need of recovery. His views are consistent with the Protestant Reformation and a biblical theology of sovereign grace. He is confident in the means of grace as sufficient to gather the elect and build up the church because he trusts the effectual work of the Holy Spirit to accomplish this. The ministerial office is dignified because the minister is regarded not as a hireling, functionary, or professional, but as a gift of Christ to his church—a man spiritually endowed and called to serve the church in the name of Jesus. If Wells is correct in his current assessment of things, Owen would be a faithful "guide" to lead the modern church back to greater strength and health.

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<sup>175</sup> Owen says, "And, indeed, this was that whereby in all ages countenance was given unto apostasy and defection from the power and truth of the gospel. The *names* of spiritual things were still retained, but applied to outward *forms* and *ceremonies*; which thereby were substituted insensibly into their room, to the ruin of the gospel in the minds of men." *Works*, 4:423.

<sup>176</sup> Packer, 219.

<sup>177</sup> *Works*, 9:460.

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