

FORUM : *Response*

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RE - PRESBYTERIAN - IZED

Part One.

Dear Editor,

I accept your kind personal invitation to me (and to Dr. Westcott), made in our B.R.J. No. 11 of 1995, to contribute to the Forum Discussion Point - on what I shall call "Rev. Dr. John Owen Re-Presbyterian-ized." I also offer for publication my enclosed Proper and Pure Presbyterian Presbyteries - reflecting my own understanding of Holy Scripture on this matter. Throughout, almost all emphases are my own.

Editor's note.

As Professor Lee's work on this topic is extensive, pressures of space force us to present it in abridged form, with part of it having to be held over to our next issue. He presents a powerful case here, and we have chosen for this issue to print those features which have the most immediate bearing on the topic raised in the last issue, namely that of the government of Christ's Church in New Testament times and subsequently. Overall Professor Lee puts the case for viewing Owen as what one might call a sub-conscious Presbyterian *even during his Congregationalist days*. The weight of Owen's understanding of the Presbyterial structure of the Old Testament people of God, and how this feature carried over into the New Testament and the Christian Church, must have lurked within his psychology like steam steadily rising in pressure in a boiler.....along the way it cannot but start to leak out as the pressure increases...till finally it erupts into vigorous action ! What Dr. Lee has done for us

in his response is to trace the tell-tale signs of the Presbyterian pressure building up deep within Owen's thought, as, under the force of the biblical facts, extending from the presbyterial structures evident in the Old Testament, right through into the New, these features percolated into his exegetical work and are spread, it would seem, throughout the broad range of his "Works", until finally, in his very last days, we find the evidence in his last piece of exegesis that literally shouts Presbyterianism at the reader.. We are grateful to Professor Lee for his erudite, prompt, and efficient response to our "Forum".

Professor Lee.

The depresbyterianized Owen later re-embraced Presbyterianism.

Dr. Owen, 1616 - 1683, was quite the greatest Congregationalist and certainly one of the most thorough theologians Britain has ever produced. Educated at Oxford, he first pastored a Presbyterian Church - in 1643, the year the Westminster Assembly itself was convened. After reading a book by the American John Cotton, Owen inwardly embraced Congregationalism.

In his next parish, he seceded from Presbyterianism. That latter was the system many in the Puritan Parliament and most at the presbyterianizing Westminster Assembly were then trying to promote in the wake of *The Solemn League and Covenant - for Reformation and Defence of Religion: the Honour and Happiness of the King; and the Peace and Safety of the three Kingdoms of Scotland, England, and Ireland* - taken and subscribed several times by King Charles and by all ranks in the said three kingdoms.

At the termination of the monarchy and the establishment of the Commonwealth in 1649, Cromwell the Congregationalist appointed Owen Vice - Chancellor at Oxford. Owen became the chief architect of the Cromwellian State Church, and helped compose the congregationalist *Savoy Declaration of Faith* in 1658 (as the intended replacement of the presbyterial *Westminster Confession of Faith* and especially its chapter 31 : 1 - 5). Subsequent to the termination of the Commonwealth and the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, Owen was ejected from Oxford.

After congregationalistically pastoring a "gathered" church" in his own home and elsewhere for the next two decades, - at the end of his life he certainly moved back toward and seems actually to have re - embraced Presbyterianism. How could it be otherwise - with Owen constantly improving his own infant baptism, in the Name of the Triune God (Who is Himself a Presbytery) ? See *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q and A. 167 ! Thus the proto - Presbyterian Rev. Dr. John Owen - after a lapse into Congregationalism - thereafter increasingly re - presbyterianized.

Owen's Biblical Theology: Elders in Old Testament Church carry over into the New Testament Church.

Dr. Westcott, as the acknowledged authority on Owen's *Biblical Theology*, would I think point out that he too discerns how Owen there presupposes the Church to

have existed already with even the most ancient *Presbuteroi* : such as Abel, Enoch, and Noah (Heb. 11 : 1 - 7 cf 10 : 25 - 29 & 13 : 7, 17, 24). Biblical Theology (alias his *Theologoumena Pantodapa* 1661), 1994 edition pp. vi - ix, 22f, 90f, 184f, 218 - 220f, 365 - 370f, 439f.

On page 593, Owen says "Jesus Christ Himself.....was He who in times past showed Himself in human form to the (patriarchal) fathers....He was that "Angel of the Lord" with the (Mosaic) **Church in the wilderness** (Acts 7 : 38)."

On page 565f, Owen insists that even while "the whole Mosaic ritual system was soon to pass away" - the "Church continued." For then "its exclusively Jewish face" was "removed to make way for the New Testament inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God" - as "the Apostles with the **Elders** and entire Church at Jerusalem decided...converts from Gentile nations should not be bound by the Law of Moses (Acts 15)."

Presbyterianism continued under the Mosaic Law.

"As was before observed," explains Owen (XVII ; 167), "**there are two parts of the law** — the *moral precepts* of it, and the *instituted worship* appointed in it.....The *moral precepts* of it are the same with those that **were written in the heart of man by nature or the law of his creation**, which he transgressed in his first rebellion." Gen. 1 : 26-28; 2 : 15-17; Eccl. 7 : 29; Isa. 24 : 5; Hos. 6 : 7f; Rom. 2 : 14f. See too the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 19 : 1-2, and also Owen's identical reproduction thereof in his own *Savoy Declaration* 19 : 1-2.

Now it is very significant that Moses interacted with the Elders of the people of God especially at the time of the giving of the Ten Commandments. Remarks Owen (XVII ; 473f) : "Moses went up into the Mount of God (Ex. 19 : 3).....Being ascended, God calls unto him.....and teacheth him to prepare the people for the receiving of the law, chap. 19 : 3-6." Moses came and called for the **Elders** of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the Lord commanded him. (Exod. 19 : 7 cf 20 : 1 - 20).

Provision was made for restitution, in respect of certain crimes, to be made just "as the **Judges** determine.... both parties shall come before the **Judges**..... Whom the **Judges** shall condemn, he shall pay double unto his neighbour." Exod. 21 : 22f cf. 22 : 9. So Moses took seventy of the **Elders** alias the **Nobles** of Israel half-way up Mount Sinai; built an altar and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel for the national Church of the Old Testament; and looked upon the paved work of sapphire stone under the feet of Israel's God. Exod. 24 : 4-9f cf. Num. 11 : 16-25.

Owen observes (XVII : 504f) that "for the families of the fathers there were.... 'the **Elders**' who presided over them. These Moses and Aaron gathered together.... And these, as I said before, being the Rulers of the first families, were probably in number seventy — from when afterwards was the constitution of seventy **Elders** for rule. Exod. 24 : 1.

“There were **Officers** who attended the service of the whole people as to the execution of justice and order..... They are afterwards distinguished from the **Elders** and the **Judges**, Deut. 16 : 18..... After these things, by God’s appointment, was constituted the ‘**Great Court of the Sanhedrin**’ alias the ‘**Session of the Highest Board of Elders.**”

The degeneration of the post-exilic Hebrew Sanhedrin.

The ‘Sanhedrin’ mentioned in our last citation from Owen was one in a system of graded Courts, comprising of at least the Lesser Sanhedrin and the Greater Sanhedrin. References in the Older Testament to the roots and perhaps too even the first buddings of the then-developing Sanhedrins, include : Deut.17 : 6-10; 19 : 11-15; Ezra 5 : 5-11; 6 : 7-14; 10 : 8; Neh.2 : 16; 4 : 13-21; 7 : 4-7f.

References to Sanhedrins in uninspired inter-testamental Hebrew writings are found inter alia also in *II Maccabees* 1 : 10; 4 : 44; *Judith* 4 : 8; 11 : 14; 15 : 8; and in Josephus’ *Antiquities* IV : 8 : 41; and, in particular, *Sanhedrin* 1 : 6f. References in the inspired New Testament to the by-then degenerated Sanhedrins, corrupted from Hebrew Trinitarianism into Judaistic Unitarianism, are found in : Matt. 5 : 22; 26 : 59; Mk.15 : 1; Luke 22 : 66; John 11 : 47; Acts 4 : 15; 5 : 21; 6 : 12; 22 : 5; and 22 : 30.

Acts 5 : 21 refers to “the **Council** and all the **Senate** of the children of Israel.” The original Greek here has το Συνηδριον και πασων την Γερουσιαν των Υιων Ισραηλ where Συνηδριον (pronounce it soon-ed-ree-yon) means “the sitting of the board”; and where Γερουσια (pronounce it Ger-oo-zee-ya) means “Senate of Elders”. (Editor’s note : Note how this feature is obscured to the reader of the English Bible !). Jerome’s Vulgate here has *Concilium* which means “Council”; and *Seniores* which means “Senators” alias “Elders”.

Also Acts 22 : 5 refers to “all the **estate** of the **Elders.**” There the New Testament Greek has παν το Πρεσβυτεριον alias “the entire **Presbyteriate.**” The Vulgate has *omnes Majores*, alias “all of the **Major (Officers).**”

These Judaistic courts had apostacised from the Trinitarianism of the Older Testament to the later Unitarianism of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. As Owen observes (II : 273) — “The Jews, in the time of our Saviour’s converse on the earth, being fallen greatly from the faith and worship of their fore-fathers, and ready to sink into their last and utmost apostasy from God, seem amongst many other truths to have much lost that of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and of the person of the Messiah.”

Older Testament Presbyterianism continues as Christian Presbyterianism.

However, the corrupt Judaistic Sanhedrins — as perversions of the pure Presbyterianism of the Older Testament — were soon to be replaced by correct Christian Courts. Even as Jesus had Himself predicted, the Kingdom of God was removed from the apostate priests “and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits

thereof." Matt. 21 : 23-43. This re-form-ed nation is the Christian Church of the Newer Testament, with its Presbyterian system of graded Courts grounded in the Older Testament.

The Christian Church's system of graded Courts themselves continued and expanded those of Ancient Israel. Bypassing the corrupted courts of apostate Judaism, they consist of : The Christian Kirk Session of Elders, which rules each local Congregation (Phil. 1 : 1; I Tim. 3 : 1f; Titus 1 : 5f); The Christian Classis or *Presbuterion* of regional Elders, which supervises the Kirk Sessions (Acts 13 : 1-5 and 14 : 23; and I Tim. 4 : 14); and further the Christian General Assembly, as a Synod or "Meeting of the Highest Board of Elders" to which all Presbyteries may appeal. (Exod. 18 : 12-26; Deut. 1 : 13-17; 16 : 18; 17 : 6-9; 19 : 12-15; Matt. 16 : 18; 18 : 15-20; Acts 14 : 26f; 15 : 1-41; 16 : 1-5; and Heb. 12 : 22f.)

Very remarkably, even when still a Congregationalist, the already represbyterianizing Owen (XV : 262) quite clearly writes : "Some there are who plead for a **national** Church-state arising from an association of the **Officers** of particular Churches in several degrees, which they call *classical* and *provincial*, until it extend itself unto the limits of a whole nation..... I shall **neither** examine nor **oppose** this opinion; there hath been enough, if not too much, already disputed about it."

Owen then also writes (XV : 325f): "Such a Church-state was constituted and appointed under the **Old Testament**, founded in and on an especial covenant between God and the people, **Exod. 24** (See especially the graded "Elders" alias the "Nobles" in vv 1-11). Unto this **Church**, everyone that would please God and walk before Him was bound to join himself.....

"As the Apostle demonstrates at large in his Epistle to the Hebrews (Cf. 12 : 22f and 13 : 7-17 etc.) — all the commands (and) promises and threatenings given or annexed unto that (viz. the **Older Testament**) **Church-state** concerning the **conjunction** of men unto it and walking in it, are **transferred** unto this of the new erection of **Christ**.

"Wherefore, although the state of the Church itself be reduced from that which was **nationally** congregational unto that which is simply and absolutely so" — the decongegationalizing Owen cautiously goes on — "yet the **commands**, promises and **threatenings** made and given unto it as a **Church** are **all in full** force with respect unto this **new** (viz. **Newer Testament**) **Church-state**."

Christ's continuing promise : " I shall keep on building My Church!"

Now the first indications of this development of the Old Testament system of graded Courts into their counterparts within the New Testament Christian Church, are found in Matt. 16 : 19 and 18 : 15-20. In the former verse, Christ announces: "I will build My **Church**."

The above expression **cannot** mean, as Dispensationalists allege: "I shall **start** building My Church" (although only after Calvary). It can **only** mean: "I shall **continue** building My Church" (also and especially after Calvary). For Christ had

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started to build His Church in the garden of Eden (Gen. 1 : 26-28 and 3 : 15f). and had **continued** building it ever since.

In Matt. 16 : 19, the word “build” translates οικοδομησω (pronounce it oik-od-o-may-sow) — which here apparently means: “I shall keep on building.” The tense is future-continuous. It suggests that the Son of God Who had been building His Church ever since 4004 B.C., would also in the future keep on building and indeed continue to **expand** it — even until the very end of world history. Cf. Matt. 28 : 16-20.

Owen himself writes (XV :335 & XV : 512) that “all Christians were *original-ly of one mind* in all things needful unto **joint communion...** The *discipline of the Church.....*consists in the due exercise of that **authority and power** which the Lord Christ, in and by his Word, hath granted unto the **Church** for its continuance, **increase** and preservation in purity, **order** and holiness according to his appointment. **Matt. 16 : 19**; Rom.12 : 8; 2 Cor. 10 : 4-6; Rev. 2 : 2, 20.”

In XVI :106, Owen also states: “**The rule and government of the (New Testament) Church**, or the *execution of the authority of Christ* therein, is in the hand of the **Elders**. All Elders in Office have rule, and **none** have rule in the Church **but Elders**. As such, rule doth belong unto **them**. The **Apostles**, by virtue of their especial Office, were intrusted with **all Church-power**; but therefore they **were Elders also**. I Pet. 5 : 1; 2 John 1; 3 John 1. See Acts 21 : 18; I Tim. 5 : 17. There are some of them, on other accounts, called ‘Bishops, Pastors, Teachers, Ministers, **Guides**’ — but what belongs unto any of them in point of **rule**, or what interest they have therein, it belongs unto them as (**Presbyters** or) **Elders and not otherwise**. Acts 20 : 17, 20.

“**So (too) under the Old Testament**, where the word (Elder) doth not signify a difference in age but is used in a moral sense, **Elders are the same with Rulers** or Governors — whether in Offices civil or ecclesiastical. Especially **the Rulers of the Church were constantly called its Elders**. And the use of the word, with the abuse of the power or office intended by it, is traduced to signify men in authority (‘*Seniores, Aldermanni*’) in **all** places.

“Church-power, acted in its rule, is called ‘The keys of the kingdom of heaven’ by an expression derived from the keys that were a sign of office-power in the families of kings. Isaiah 22 : 22..... It is used by our Saviour Himself to denote the communication of Church-power unto others, which is absolutely and universally vested in Himself — under the name of ‘The Key of David.’ Rev. 3 :7; Matt. 16 : 19.”

Old and New Testament Church discipline by at least two or three Elders.

Also especially the second above-mentioned passage (Matt. 18 : 15-20) ultimately involves the entire Church and all of its graded Courts. For it declares that if a Christian’s brother shall trespass against him, the offended one is to go and tell him his fault between the two of them alone. If the offender then heeds the com-

plainant, the latter will thus have “gained” or won back his brother.

However, if the offender will not heed the complainant, the latter is then to take with him one or two more persons — so that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. If the offender neglects to heed **them**, this is to be told to the **Church**. Then, if he neglects to heed the **Church** — he is thenceforth to be regarded as a heathen.

Jesus then went on to assure especially all of His apostolic Elders there that whatever they would bind on earth, would be bound in heaven; and that whatever they would loosen on earth, would be loosed in heaven. Again He assured them that if two of them would agree on earth regarding anything they would request, it would be done for them by His Father in heaven. “For where two or three (plural) are gathered together in My Name,” He promised them — “there am I in the midst of them (plural).” See too John 20 : 21-23f.

This passage regarding serious grievances, was addressed by Christ generally to all of “the disciples” alias ‘those whom He had taught’ (Matt. 18 : 1) - and particularly to His Presbytery of the twelve ‘sent-out’ Apostles. John 20 : 21-23f ; cf Luke 22 : 8 - 30 and 24 : 33-48f. On **appeal**, after an unsuccessful private admonition, such matters were to go before at least two or three witnessing Elders or Judges - and, if again unsuccessful, finally before special gatherings of the whole Church (as distinct from meetings simply of any local Congregation).

For compare the words “**two or three witnesses**” in Matt. 18 : 16 and “**Church**” in 18 : 17 and “**you**” and “**ye**” (plurals) repeatedly in Matt. 18 : 18-19 and “**two or three**” specially “**gathered together in My Name**” in Matt. 18 : 20 — with the words “the Elders” and “**two witnesses...or three witnesses**” in Deut. 19 : 12-15, and with the words “**two witnesses or three witnesses**” and “**a matter too hard for thee in judgment**” and “**then shalt thou arise and get thee up into the place which the Lord thy God shall choose**” in Deut. 17 : 6-9. Also note how the same words “**too hard**” in Deut 1 : 13-17 and the words “**hard causes**” in Exod. 18 : 12-26, there too presuppose such an **appeal procedure** — from **one** set of Elders, to **another** set of Elders.

It is therefore clear that matt. 18 : 15f is derived from both Deut. 17 : 6f and 19 : 12f (and more remotely also from both Deut . 1 : 13-17 and Exod. 18 : 12-26). However, all those texts teach **not just the rule of Elders over their own local Congregation**. They also **authorize appeals** from such a local Court to a **higher Court of similar Ruling Judges**. So too, it follows — by good and necessary inference — does Matt. 18 : 15f.

Owen on the Confederative nature of Church discipline according to Matt. 18 : 15f.

As also Dr. John Owen explains (XV : 177f) : “None can be ignorant of what is required of them, Matt. 18 : 15-20..... They are bound by the Law of Christ in **due order**...required of them toward the Church.... The duty also of the whole Church

is such cases is no less evidently declared...to **put from amongst** them (!!!) such obstinate offenders..... Hereunto also are subservient all the commands that are given them to exhort and admonish one another (cf. Heb. 10 : 24-29 and 12 : 22f and 13 : 7-17), that the **whole Church** may be preserved in purity, **order**, holiness, and faithfulness....

“With whom rests the principal care and **power** — according to the mind of Christ — to see the **discipline** of the Church in particular congregations exercised, and to exercise it accordingly ? If this should be found to be in the Ministers (plural) and, through their neglect in the administration of it, offenders be left in their sins and impenitency without a due application of the means for their healing and recovery; if **the Church itself** come to be corrupted thereby, and to fall under the displeasure of Jesus Christ — as these things in one degree or other, more or less, will ensure on that neglect — it will not turn unto their comfortable account at the great day. That this is their **duty**, that this **authority** and **inspection** is **committed** unto them, the reasons before **insisted** on....do undeniably evince.”

Further, in XVI : 154 and XVI : 169 Owen adds : “All lawful societies constituting such by voluntary **confederation** according unto peculiar laws and rules of their own choice unto especial duties and ends, have a right and power by the light of nature to receive into their society those that are willing and meet — engaging themselves to observe the rules, laws and ends of the society and to expel them out of it who wilfully deviate from those rules.... Wherefore, when our Lord Jesus Christ gives unto his **Church** the **power of binding and loosing** — directing **them** in the exercise of that power — He directs them to ask assistance by prayer when they are **gathered** together, Matt. 18 : 18-20.

To be continued. (DV).

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perfectly right, and equally sure from my own and other's experience that the truths expressed in the BRJ *do have a practical aim through and through*, in that our aim is to draw people back to the pure Scripture truths, and to divest themselves of all the fleshly egocentric accoutrements of sinful mankind....and to live by God's Word alone.

We do not “fiddle, while Rome burns”. Many of our members and our preachers spend enormous time, trouble, and effort, in the work of the Gospel, and thanks be to God, with His blessing evident upon it unworthy though we are! And in all this we find how supremely practical our researches concerning the Gospel “offer” have been, in that we are able to preach with the certain note of the Old Gospel, of the Apostles and

the Reformers, unadulterated with the poison of Arminianized non-gospels.

May God deliver us from all fear of controversy. When even in the House of the Reformed compromisers work to mix God's priceless truth with an Arminianized “mess of pottage”, shall we be silent, shall we be nice, and “loving” [Is it loving to be silent when God's Truth is being seriously adulterated ?] Shall we become like those who “have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying Peace, peace; when there is no peace”[Jer. 6 : 14]?

Imperfect watchmen we may be, but by God's grace we will not be silent watchmen. Mr. James, out of his Christian concern wrote us this letter, will he not out of the same concern join us in this battle?