
The Fight for the Reformed Faith

John Owen

Bulwark against Arminianism

PART II

THE EMERGENT SCHOLAR-PASTOR

As the year 1637 unfolded, the rising star of the evil Archbishop Laud ascended, inexorably, it seemed, higher and higher. England writhed under the insensate dispensations of this ruthless ecclesiastic and the wild demands of a power-crazed King. English churches and Bishops were collapsing, like skittles, before Laud's Romanizing drive. "The altar", said he, "the altar is the greatest place of God's residence on earth,...yea,greater than the pulpit."²⁵ Thus he set the stage for the recrudescence of the Romish Mass, as across the breadth of the realm, clerics and Bishops busied themselves in accomodating the communion tables, once again, under the east windows of the chancel.....the altar position. A clear reversal of the Reformation.

If Laud's star was in the ascendancy, then by contrast young John Owen's star had virtually disappeared. It seemed he had lost all. Leaving Oxford in that fateful year, "self-exiled for conscience' sake", had been painful, it had been home to him for nigh ten years, full of youthful associations and hallowed memories. We find him plunged into gloom. The mental depressions that had burdened his spiritual life for years assumed acute proportions after he left the University City, and far from receiving great spiritual joy from God as a reward for his faithfulness against Laud's Arminianizing policies, Owen's experience was to be one of despondency that was to press on him for another four more years.

Often, those of high intelligence are subject to neuroses, depressions, even deep confusions, as their minds seem to accumulate so much information so quickly. "Much learning doth make thee mad!" (Acts 26:24). Moreover, such intellects can often be confounded by the masses of material which they can seem to comprehend

²⁵ **Laud:** Works vi.57 Cited in Tyacke : *Anti-Calvinists* (Oxford Univ. Press 1987) p. 202.

at once. All this, compounded with spiritual convictions, and aggravated by outward vicissitudes, held Owen as if in a vice for years. But such turmoils remain as much under the sovereign hand of God as the good times. "God was now educating him" said Thomson, "in a higher school than that of Oxford, and subjecting him to that fiery discipline by which He tempers and fashions His most chosen instruments."²⁶

During those wilderness years, under the Sovereign hand of God, the young scholar found employment as chaplain and tutor to certain gentlefolk. Meanwhile, the course of his deep spiritual depressions seemed to follow the state of the nation, and in those years of his obscurity 1637-1641 Owen's condition, like that of the nation, became more and more acute.

The storm clouds of civil war were gathering. Yeoman farmers of Eastern England, Parliamentarians, Puritan aristocrats, Puritan peasants, and Calvinist clerics were standing up to be counted. If the policies of the obnoxious Laud were intolerable, then the absolutist "Divine Right of Kings" policies of Charles I were also detested at large, as his profligate fiscal demands hiked the nation's taxes to exorbitant degrees. A giant rent had opened, which grew wider and wider, between King Charles and Parliament, the result of years of exacerbated controversies between the monarch and the elected representatives of the nation. Scotland had already taken up arms against the tyranny imposed in Kirk and State by the Laudian party, when, in the May of 1640 violent demonstrations racked London, and a mob marched on Laud's residence at Lambeth Palace, howling for his blood. The public mood had put the king in an invidious position, he was supremely responsible for the state of the nation, so to avoid being seen as the culprit, he turned Judas on his right-hand man, Laud, and hauled him in to the Tower, a convenient scapegoat. Laud's star had indeed fallen, but its fall was but to presage that of his master at the end of that same decade. And as Laud began a four year imprisonment, a new star was rising in the fenlands of eastern England, one who, besides being a gentleman farmer and MP for Cambridge, was a deeply spiritual, Christian man, a great administrator, and a genius of a soldier..... the indomitable Oliver Cromwell.

As the fateful decade of the 1640's began to unfold, Owen found himself at loggerheads with his gentleman employer. Lord Lovelace was a Royalist, and was throwing in his lot with the Romanizing party. Consequentially, suddenly unemployed, on top of all this Owen learned from Wales that his rich uncle there, also a Royalist, had finally disinherited him, and had bestowed his wealthy estate on another. Thus, the two major forces of chastisement, outward vicissitudes, and inward spiritual torment, blitzed his soul simultaneously and incessantly. "We have no means" says Thomson, "of ascertaining with certainty what were the causes of

²⁶ Thomson: Brief biography of Owen: in *Owen: Works I* pp.XXVIII-XXX.

these dreadful conflicts in Owen's mind.....the terrors of the Lord seemed.....to compass him about."²⁷ "But we are disposed to think," Thomson goes on, "that [Owen's] noble treatise.... the Exposition of the 130th Psalm,written many years afterwards, is in a great degree the effect as well as the record of what he suffered [in those years]."

Psalm 130 ! "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD. !" Certainly the known facts concerning Owen's circumstances, and his exposition of those sacred lyrics seem to bear out Thomson's thesis here.²⁸ With deep spiritual pathos Owen points therein to the two major factors used in spiritual chastisement, the outward vicissitudes, and the inner spiritual torment of a soul under the terrors of the Lord. Such chastisements are, says he, "of two sorts:- **Providential**, in respect of outward distresses, calamities and afflictions.....[and]....**Internal** depths.....of conscience upon the account of sin..."²⁹ . Knowing of his harrowing personal experience, extended over so many years, and his deep intellect whereby he would examine every facet of his subject with painstaking minuteness, one can see the very hand of God in all this, fashioning the scholar-pastor for his future service in the Church and nation.

In the year 1641, as affairs in the nation were further exacerbated by the Romanist rebellion in Ireland, Owen nevertheless found rest to his soul, through the ministrations of an unknown preacher expounding Matt. 8 : 26, "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" Despite diligent efforts afterwards, Owen never was able to find out who the preacher was. Thus, as Thomson observes, the great scholar found peace for his soul from the ministrations of a humble unknown.

The long trial was now to turn to an advantage for Owen that he could never have foreseen during those long, harrowing years. As the details of his exposition of Psalm 130 demonstrate, he had plumbed the very depths that make a pastor. And a pastor he was now to become. In the closing months of 1641 and in early 1642 he prepared his first book for the printers- the magnificent "Display of Arminianism", a treatise doubtless rooted in his studies at Oxford, and particularly in his confrontation with Laudianism. Thomson is no doubt correct to say that the deep and lengthy consideration of these matters had doubtless made a salient contribution to his depressions. True it is to say that the high doctrines of Divine Sovereignty and Predestination can often bring the Terrors of the Lord upon those who contemplate these matters. For Owen, confronted with Laudian Arminianism, such considerations were unavoidable. Again, in God's Sovereign Providence, this

²⁷ Thomson: Op. cit. p. XXX.

²⁸ See Owen's Works Vol.VI, pages 323 onwards for his exposition of Psalm 130. Thomson says that this exposition is "as full of Christian experience as of rich theology."

²⁹ Owen op cit. p.331.

aspect of Owen's trials was to bear enduring fruit via this, his first theological treatise.³⁰

It was the publication of this treatise that brought him to the notice of Parliament, now at war with the apostate royal court and Romanizing bishops. The book was the means of bringing him to the notice of a committee appointed to purge the church of scandalous ministers. This committee had recently deposed the indolent incumbent of the parish of Fordham, near Colchester in Essex, and, obviously impressed by Owen's treatise against Arminianism, they promptly invited Owen to fill the vacancy. In those stirring days of 1642, as Cromwell began the moves that brought together the New Model Army, Owen accepted the call to Fordham, and it is to this pastorate, and the one he later exercised at nearby Coggeshall, that we now turn.

One might balk at the thought of the mighty Owen, the genius, the scholar characterised by such prolixity of thought and expression, becoming the pastor of a little country village amongst a sparse population consisting mainly of uneducated farmworkers and tradesmen. How could he, who was to become the author of a giga-commentary on "Hebrews" some 3,500 pages long, not to mention all his other works, how could he engage pastorally and edifyingly with those simple country folk, who for years previously had been served by a minister who left them spiritually blind? Can the scholar and the pastor be found in one person? All too rarely, it seems, but evidently Owen was an exception. Here at Fordham, he passed the happiest days of his life, and he set himself "with earnest system to break up the fallow ground, and to preach those truths which had still to his mind all the freshness of first love. The good Puritan practice of visiting and catechising from house to house gave him a large place in the affections of his people, as well as revealed to him the measure of their Christian intelligence; while his solid preaching soon gathered around him the inhabitants of his own parish, and even allured multitudes across the borders of the neighbouring parishes to listen to his weighty words."³¹ Apparently, as Thomson tells us, soon Owen was surrounded by "one of those widespread and enduring reformations" something on a par with the results alleged for Baxter's preaching at Kidderminster, results which "have never followed on any agency save the earnest preaching of Christ crucified".

At Fordham Owen's labours extended through the years from 1642 to 1646. They were, indeed, for him, halcyon days. There he met and married a Christian lady of the surname Rooke, who was to bear him eleven children, ten of whom, sadly, were

³⁰ "A Display of Arminianism" is found in *Owen's Works* Vol. X pp.1 - 137. For those who aspire to begin reading Owen's theological treatises, this one is an excellent place to start, as it reads fairly easily as compared to the prolixity of his later works.

³¹ Thomson : Op. Cit. p. XXXIII

to die in early youth.

We see then, the conscientious pastor and family man, ever busy in his Saviour's work. And all this against the background of England's Civil War, in which Owen was himself to be involved. But if he was so deeply engaged, on the one hand, with his pastoral duties and family responsibilities, on the other hand, his scholarly mind and pen never seemed to be in abeyance. Another major theological treatise of profound proportions was being gradually put together, work that took Owen seven years before it finally emerged, as we shall see, in the year 1648. Besides this, just one year into his Fordham pastorate, in 1643 he published "The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished."³² A small treatise, it is one of the most useful of Owen's smaller works, and it tackles the issue of the relationships and responsibilities of pastors and people. It seems that Owen was concerned to counter, on the one hand, those "ecclesiastics who sought to place their interdict on every thing like the agency of private members in the church", and on the other hand, to counter those who would introduce into the church a "spirit of wild democracy" that would "make all the Lord's people prophets" and dispense with the ordained ministry. One might, in these modern times, remember, how "there is nothing new under the sun", and recommend Owen's little treatise for serious contemplation by pastors and people alike today! Thomson says of this treatise that "it is remarkable for its skilful harmonizing of authority with liberty", and that if Burnett's "Pastoral Care" and Baxter's "Reformed Pastor" may be recommended as guides for pastoral practice, then this treatise of Owen's might well be recommended as a "handbook" for the people.

By now the nation was ablaze from top to bottom, spiritually, and militarily. From July 1st 1643 the newly appointed Westminster Assembly began their long and momentous theological deliberations in the nation's capital. Not so far from their place of assembly, the now hapless Laud, formerly incarcerated in the Tower by the King, had already found to his further chagrin that the Puritan Parliamentarians were the Tower's new masters. Accordingly, in the spring of 1643 he was subjected to trial on charges of high treason, and the year 1644 opened auspiciously as the evil prelate, found guilty and condemned to death, was despatched into eternity from the end of the axeman's judicial swing on January 10th. On through 1644 and 1645, Cromwell's New Model Army, the "Ironsides" went into action, their enthusiasm fanned into flame by Biblical Psalmody and the Word of God preached by sturdy Calvinist chaplains. At Marston Moor, in Yorkshire, on the summer evening of 2nd. July 1644, Charles I and his massed brigades of apostate profligates went down, thrashed to pieces at Cromwell's hands, whose battle-cry: "Charge!.....in the name of the Most High!" unleashed the valour of his Puritan troops as a thunderstorm rent the skies above them.

³² Owen: Works Vol.13

Through all these momentous times, Owen worked away quietly and conscientiously amongst his beloved parishioners. In 1644 and 1645 he brought to the press a new work, "The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ Unfolded, in Two Short Catechisms."³³ The first of these, the "Lesser Catechism" is intended primarily for children, and is truly the "sincere milk" of Scripture Truth. It is cleverly keyed in by references to the chapters of the following "Greater Catechism", each of which is a logical expansion in depth of the question themes of the "Lesser". Children, and perhaps new converts, having learned the "Lesser" would thereby have learned the basis and the "spine" of the "Greater", and would be ready to move on to this latter as they matured. The overall structure manifests excellent principles of educative psychology, and indicates how this high academic was yet able to bring himself down alongside the simplest of his parishioners, and systematically edify them in the knowledge of the "Lord Christ". In extending and deepening the knowledge of the "Lesser", the "Greater Catechism" was of tremendous utility for adults and for parents to use in domestic instruction. The doctrinal scope of both catechisms ranges from "the Holy Scripture, the Word of God", through the Trinity, the decrees, creation, the fall, Christology and Redemption, Election, Ecclesiology, the spiritual life of believers, the sacraments, and the Glory of God as the end of it all. Veritably, Owen covered all the essentials for a sound Calvinistic creed, and this, a few years ahead of the "Shorter Catechism" produced by that august assemblage at Westminster. The old English parish churches had need of a sturdy catechism in those days. It is extremely doubtful if, by Owen's time, any English copies of the 1591 edition of the Heidelberg Catechism were left in circulation, after Laud's nation-wide purge of masses of the Calvinist literature in the land, notably Cranmerian Prayer Books and doubtless, Heidelberg Catechisms.³⁴ Owen's work was seminal in this respect, and both his catechisms breathe the spirit of devotion and holy sanctity.³⁵

Through those years 1642-1646, while the Civil War rumbled on, as he laboured on at Fordham, Owen's reputation as a solid, uncompromising Reformed Pastor and Preacher extended wider and wider, till in April 1646 we find him appointed to

³³ These two catechisms are found pages 467 ff. of *Owen's Works*, Vol. 1

³⁴ The *Heidelberg Catechism* was officially accepted by the **Church of England** in **1567** as a standard teaching document of her faith. *Two English editions* are known of, that of **1567**, and a later one of **1591**. A *third* edition appeared in **1764**, but by then would not have carried much, if any, weight in Anglican circles. Alas! Cf. Historical introduction to the HEIDELBERG CATECHISM p.7 as printed in 1986 edition of Pine Hill Press, Freeman, S. Dakota 57029.

³⁵ One might again, recommend that readers who may wish to begin studying Owen, yet find him so difficult, ought to begin with these **Catechisms**, perhaps indeed, prior to any other part of his works. Generally, these two catechisms, (*Works* Vol. 1); the "**Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished**", (*Works* Vol. 13), the "**Display of Arminianism**", (*Works* Vol. 10), then perhaps "**Biblical Theology**", would, consecutively provide non theologically trained readers with perhaps the easiest way into the vast and prolix masses of material that Owen produced.

preach before Parliament, on occasion of its monthly fast. There he expounded on Acts 16: 9 with such effect that Parliament commanded the discourse to be printed.

But now, Owen's connection with Fordham was brought to an end. The ineffective parson who had preceded him had spent the last four years under suspension. This meant that his parish was effectively, under English Church Canon Law, "under sequestration", and its ministry supplied by whoever the Sequestrators appointed for the purpose. Owen had been the choice of the Sequestrating committee, and hence, though supplying the vacancy, yet, under the same Canon Law, he had no established right to the incumbency. He was legally only a "locum". In 1646, the suspended former parson died, and immediately, by Canon Law, the parish was automatically released from sequestration, and its Patron was free to appoint a new incumbent. Evidently not sympathetic to Owen's theology, the patron used his legal powers to appoint someone else. Owen was thus redundant.

However, just five or six miles to the south west, the important market town of Coggeshall was bereft of its faithful, godly minister. On finding out that Owen had been deprived of Fordham, the parishioners at Coggeshall lost no time in sending a pressing invitation to him to become their minister. In this choice they were backed by their patron, the godly Puritan Earl of Warwick. Owen accepted the call, and found himself with a faithful congregation which had been previously well watered and sown by a succession of godly ministers, so that his work was not so much that of foundation-laying, but more of building. There, "he soon found himself surrounded by a congregation of nearly two thousand people, whose religious consistency and Christian intelligence were a delight to his heart, and whose strong attachment to him subsequent events gave them abundant opportunities of testifying."³⁶

From 1646 to 1651 Owen laboured at Coggeshall. In London, the Westminster Assembly still pursued their intense deliberations, a task that would not be complete until March 25th, 1652. Meanwhile the anxieties of the Civil War still rumbled over the land, and in mid June 1648, the war, now in its closing stages in England, came to the borders of Owen's own parish. Friends of King Charles suddenly rose up in Essex in an insurrection against Parliamentary rule, and had siezed nearby Colchester. For ten weeks, the Puritan General Fairfax besieged that city, until it surrendered to him on August 28th. During his campaign, Fairfax had lodged his regimental headquarters in Coggeshall, and so began a lasting and deep friendship with Owen. During the siege Owen became, what he described in his own words as: "an endangered spectator", and at its close he preached two sermons, one of which was to the Army at Colchester on a day of Thanksgiving for the victory. Both sermons were soon published under the title: "Memorial of the Deliverance of Essex", and

³⁶ Cf. Wood's: *Athenae Oxonienses.*, iv. 100. cited in Thomson, op cit. p XXXV.

these duties were to bring him once again to the notice of Parliament, who in the following year commanded him to preach before them on Wednesday January 31st 1649, the day after the execution of King Charles 1st. This sermon, entitled "Righteous Zeal Encouraged by Divine Protection" is based on Jeremiah 15 : 19-20, and became the occasion of much criticism of Owen by later generations that followed long after him.³⁷ The Parliament of 1649 evidently liked his discourse,³⁸ and invited him back to preach before them on the 19th April that same year, when he preached his "celebrated sermon" entitled "On the Shaking of Heaven and Earth", based on Hebrews 12 : 27. Cromwell was present, and heard Owen for the first time. So impressed was he, that he resolved there and then that Owen should come with him to Ireland as chaplain, and to set in order the affairs of the University of Dublin. In that land, subsequent to the Papist uprising in 1641, chaos had spread for nearly a decade, during which massacres of Protestants occurred on an enormous scale. Estimates range as high as 200 000 slaughtered Protestants, though this figure has been largely disclaimed.³⁹ Owen, mindful of the claims, and affections of his church at Coggeshall declined Cromwell's invitation, but Cromwell would not listen to his refusal. He wrote to Owen's congregation making his request that they should release him, but "they showed themselves even more averse to the separation" than Owen did. At this, the determined Cromwell uprated his request to the status of a command, and on taking advice from various Puritan brother ministers, Owen finally acceded to the soldier's wishes, and began his preparations for the hazardous duties that now befell him.⁴⁰

Amidst the turmoils of the years 1646 to 1648, Owen's pen had been again diligently at work. In 1647 we find him publishing "Eshcol; or, Rules of direction for the Walking of Saints according to the order of the Gospel."⁴¹ Here again, it is Owen the Pastor that is prominent, his concern being to recall men from the controversies over Church government, and to the serious performance of those humble duties which grow out of their fellowship in the Gospel.

But Owen the scholar and incisive polemicist was active too during those years. Arminianism still clung on across the realm, despite the demise of Laud on the one hand, and the prominence of the Westminster Assembly on the other. Shorn of Romanist trappings and Erastian connections, the heresy appeared as a much more

³⁷ Even **Thomas M'Crie**, the excellent biographer of **Knox**, in the 19th Century wrote (Miscellaneous Works p.502) in somewhat disparaging terms of Owen on account of this sermon, giving the impression that he thought Owen should have rebuked Parliament for the "regicide".

³⁸ It was later published, in 1649, with "*A Discourse concerning Toleration.*"

³⁹ These figures are disputed, not only by Romanists, but also by some scholars. The latter tend to "pour cold water" on the statistics, but are yet forced to admit figures in the tens of thousands.

⁴⁰ Cf. **Thomson** op. cit. ppXLII ff.

⁴¹ See **Owen : Works** Vol.XIII. Otherwise known as "**A Cluster of the Fruits of Canaan.**"

sophisticated polemic against the foundations of the Reformed Faith. Such writers as John Goodwin, (described in Schaff-Herzog as a “forerunner of John Wesley”⁴²) hawked the heresy openly, and was to precipitate a counter blitz from Owen in 1652.⁴³ But Arminianism had gone through a metamorphosis before this, and Hypothetical Universalism, with its necessary corollary, Universal Atonement, had been smuggled into the very heart of Reformed Theology in France, by the Amyraldian school from 1633 onwards. By 1643, this new theology, which appeared to be Reformed on the outside, but carried a mega-dose of the Arminian virus on the inside, had emerged in England in the shape of “The Universality of God’s Free Grace”, written by one Thomas Moore, a weaver from near Wisbech. He is described as having done “much hurt in Lincolnshire, Norfolk, and Cambridgeshire”... and was “followed from place to place by many” even to Holland.⁴⁴

This virus was to spread insidiously through the realm. It found welcome in the breasts of no less than the likes of Calamy, Arrowsmith, Seaman, and Vines at the Westminster Assembly, who pressed for the Amyraldian sentiments to be formative in the doctrinal standards under preparation by that all-important convocation.⁴⁵ And it was welcome under the roof of Richard Baxter’s parsonage at Kidderminster, and indeed, even at the home and parsonage of the Puritan Presbyterian Philip Henry, father of Matthew Henry. In fact Amyraldianism was to run like wild-fire through the later Puritan Presbyterians, running them to ruin in the opening years of the 18th Century.

Owen saw the danger, and saw, too, right through the logical structure of the Amyraldian dogma. Whilst pastor at Coggeshall he completed, finalized, and published, in 1648, the magnificent treatise: “Salus Electorum, Sanguis Jesu”, or to give it its English title: “The Death of Death in the Death of Christ”.⁴⁶ The main thrust of this treatise is concerning the nature and extent of the Atonement, and in it Owen takes up a polemic against both Arminians and Amyraldians. In it, “Owen makes no secret” says Thomson, “of having devoted to it immense research and protracted meditation.”⁴⁷ In fact, it appears that some seven years laborious effort went into it, which dates its beginning as some time about 1641, and hence it appears as being a furtherance of Owen’s initial work, the “Display of Arminianism” written

⁴² Schaff-Herzog: In loc. In the 18th Century John Wesley was to be an avid reader of John Goodwin, and had some of his Arminian works republished.

⁴³ Owen’s mega-treatise on “The Perseverance of the Saints”, being Works Vol.XI.

⁴⁴ Cf Goold’s preface to Owen’s “Death of Death” Works Vol X p.140.

⁴⁵ See: David Blunt: “Debate on Redemption at the Westminster Assembly”; in **British Reformed Journal** Issue No. 13 pp.1ff.

⁴⁶ Owen: Works Vol, X page 139 and on to page 424.

⁴⁷ Thomson: Op cit pp. XXXVII ff.

that year, and published in 1642. "The Death of Death" was therefore written over the years of Owen's two busy pastorates, and its depth of reasoning, its intense scholarship, its breadth of knowledge, have made it an invincible bulwark against the progress of Arminianism and of Amyraldianism down to this present day, when, interestingly, it has been recently challenged, by a neo-Amyraldian in the 1980's and 90's. Owen dedicated the work to the Good Earl of Warwick, his patron who had backed his call to Coggeshall. Two Presbyterian contemporaries of Owen, Richard Byfield and Stanley Gower, both of them members of the Westminster Assembly, wrote two attestations for this book, recommending it as "pulling down the rotten house of Arminianism upon the heads of those Philistines who would uphold it."⁴⁸ Unlike subsequent, and modern generations of Calvinists (sic) they did not mince their words in those days. They knew poison when they saw it, and poison was what they called it. Today a modern generation of Calvinists wants to be kind to it, and to call it something else, opening the way for its deleterious admixture to the Reformed and Biblical faith.

**One Church
cannot wrap in her bosom
Augustine
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**Calvin
and
Arminius.**

"One church", Owen rightly said, "cannot wrap in her bosom Augustine and Pelagius, Calvin and Arminius".⁴⁹ It is to be regretted that later generations of Calvinists seem to ignore this profound insight. In this modern generation we are almost universally confronted with a "Calvinism" which, while proud of the possession of the complete works of John Owen, seems not to realize that its theology is *dangerously* disparate from his, and from his generation. They may proudly possess Owen's Works, but have they read them? And have they taken the trouble to understand him? Are they aware of the theological gulf twixt themselves and the venerable old Puritan?

To his extensive and powerful expositions of Scripture Truth on these matters it is now necessary to focus, for in the salient pages of his two treatises, "A Display of Arminianism", and "The Death of Death", we find indeed the death-blows to all permutations and combinations of the Pelagian-Arminian-Amyraldian virus.

Indeed, a veritable bulwark against Arminianism. To these matters, God willing, we will attend in the Part Three of this series.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p.XXXVII.

⁴⁹ Owen: Epistle Dedicatory to "A Display of Arminianism" :Works: Vol X p.7.