

John Owen

Progressive Presbyterian?

by

Dr. Stephen P. Westcott Ph.D.

Whitefield Theological Seminary (UK).

Further to our series "Forum Response" concerning the Ecclesiology of the Puritan John Owen, we print herewith in two parts, some perspicacious observations by Dr. Westcott, which are startling as well as interesting on a number of important points. Ed.

PART ONE.

Like many another Christian who discovers the Puritans and experiences the resulting quantum leap forward in Biblical understanding, I well remember how eagerly I sought, and how avidly I devoured, anything by a 'Puritan'. I also remember the point at which I began to feel the need to categorise these great men of old, to attempt to make them 'relate' to the Church scene about me. Had they simply come and gone like some bright comet through a dark night of ecclesiastical confusion? Or had they left descendants and successors today? And if so, where, so that we might go and sit at their feet? Clearly the 'Puritans' were not a denomination in the modern sense. Clearly they were not to be found amongst the Anglicans (although I knew that some like dear old William Gurnall had stayed in the restored Church of England after 1662). Take then, as a start, three famous Puritan Johns—and see what modern writers say about them. John Flavel—Presbyterian. John Bunyan—Baptist, John Owen—Congregationalist. Well, that was a beginning, and many another Puritan could now be lined up behind these three, and labelled as the great forebears of degenerate modern denominations. That was in the 1970's for me, but the same process is followed by modern republishers of old works to this day, and by quite a few historians and theologians, not to mention 'Christians in the pew'. It is always comforting to have men (not to mention giants of old) neatly labelled. They're safer that way. Of course the denominational groups we place them in bear almost no resemblance (in doctrine or practice) to these early exemplars. That fact was obvious at once. But were these streams and traditions simply degenerated and downgraded over time, or were we seeing examples of *evolution*

at work, a process by which the modern creature is given the same generic name, but really bears no recognisable resemblance to the 'assigned' ancestor?

The problem lies really in the realm of terminology, or (if you will) of semantics. John Owen was himself acutely aware of this, pointing out at the very outset of his 'Theologoumena/ Biblical Theology' the need for precise terminology and agreed definition, or meaningful discussion to take place in any subject of study at all. With that in mind our terms of reference become *not* what is understood by 'Presbyterian', 'Independent' or even 'Baptist' *today* (used as convenient boxes to place historical figures in), but *what did they say about themselves?* What did the terminology mean to *them*? First let us look at some mythology—

John Flavel—PRESBYTERIAN. Right. So he was. But he was expelled on black Bartholomew's day in 1662, endured exile and the effects of the 'five-mile act', lived to see 'toleration' and a pastorate as a 'nonconformist'. No doubt Flavel had a body of elders assisting him at Dartmouth, but there is no evidence (following the chaos and scattering, the privation and premature deaths) that his meeting was ever able to covenant with any others in any form of broader Presbytery or court, after 1662. Given this we must conclude that Flavel was a Presbyterian *because he wished to be so*; Presbyterianism was his settled belief and conviction. But in *practice* (after the Restoration) Flavel's pastorships were *independent* meetings (lacking all higher or broader courts). Assuming an eldership within his Church (teaching elder and ruling elders), and a willingness for (currently prevented) connectionalism, we should perhaps have to classify Flavel as an 'independent Presbyterian'. At once the parameters are shifting a little, and we see that 'independent' does not have to be synonymous with 'Congregationalist', and that the term may apply in some ways (as in fact it often has in history) to a Church having a congregational Presbytery (Kirk Session), but which is unable to join in a wider Presbyterian body. With that hint let us come up from Devon to Bedfordshire.

John Bunyan—BAPTIST. Well, only very recently so it seems, for it is only in this century that our immersionist brethren have sought to 'capture' him.¹ As recently as 1905 when Silvester Horne had need to mention Bunyan's meeting in his history of nonconformity he was careful to call it an 'Independent' meeting throughout, and it takes little historical research to discover that Bunyan's greatest opponents in his own day were the strict immersionists, whilst hostility between Baptists and Bunyan's meeting continued for generations after his death. In fact poor Bunyan only became 'respectable' with the issue of an edition of 'Pilgrim's

1. A century after his day George Whitefield seems to have thought of John Bunyan as a BAPTIST. When the Arminian Wesley criticised Calvinist Puritans, claiming that he saw none of 'the liberties of Christ' in Presbyterian or Baptist writers, Whitefield replied; "What! neither Bunyan, Henry, Flavel, Halyburton, nor any of the New-England nor Scottish divines?" If Henry and Flavel represent the Presbyterians, presumably Bunyan is the 'Baptist'. Whitefield, Letter to J. Wesley, Bethesda, Georgia, Dec 24th, 1740.

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Progress' by Poet Laureate Southey in 1830, an "eminently beautiful and splendid edition, replete with all that the printer and engraver can do for it" (MacCauley). Suddenly the middle and upper classes discovered and adopted the forgotten 'genius' (safely dead for a century-and-a-half). Bunyan relics came into fashion, and a mythology sprang up. Now it was desirable to have Bunyan as a spiritual ancestor- and the fight to 'own' him developed. So where shall we place him in a modern scheme of denominational 'isms'? At least one modern writer tackles this question- and retires from the field baffled and beaten; "He had established no Church or Gospel according to Bunyan, no Bunyanites. He enjoyed doctrinal wrangles worthy of a bishop against the Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers, Ranters, Presbyterians, Millennialists and Seekers. He doesn't qualify for the Family of Love, the Muggletonians or Arminians. So many to chose from but he doesn't fit. That is why I have described him as *a moderate Puritan who became a Nonconformist*".² Which is, after all, a pretty clear admission of defeat. If our categories are inadequate to deal with the reality of the seventeenth century situation perhaps we should say so- and seek enlightenment from the man himself; what he *said* (wrote) and what he *did*. Beyond question John Bunyan had two of his daughters baptised as infants in the parish Church at Elstow. (Visitors can still see the very font, where infant John himself had been presented before them.) More cogently still he himself as pastor of the Bedford 'meeting' baptised his subsequent children there, *as infants* and *by sprinkling*. His famous work "Water Baptism no bar to Communion"³ must be read in light of this. Here is no Baptist who is tolerant of paedobaptists, but rather a convinced paedobaptist (by example) tolerating those who scrupled to bring their children for baptism. In the 1660s/70s, with a 'grass-roots' gathered Church in a rural area, it is clear that many potential members would be influenced by the anabaptism of the day, and had Bunyan excluded them he would have had a very small congregation indeed. So he practised toleration and taught (by word and example) covenant paedobaptism. No wonder he was raged at by the strict immersionists of his day! So Bunyan is an 'independent'. But is he a 'Congregationalist'? So far as I am aware nowhere in his writings does John Bunyan teach or advocate a theory of congregational independency, or say that each and every local Church is complete in itself, needing no other union but the vertical one with Christ its Head. So the Bunyan Church was also 'independent' by necessity, by pressure of circumstances. We are getting closer to the reality of the age, but at the expense of our modern terminology. And who shall say that if there had been a number of Bunyan-type Churches, agreed in doctrine and practice, they would not have covenanted together to pool their wisdom and resources in combined government. And if there had been should we not have had to shift our parameters again, and talk of Bunyan the Presbyterian? (Or, fascinatingly, had the Presbyterian estab-

2. John Nicholson; "*John Bunyan and the Visionary Search for an English Conscience*". London, 1983, p.75.

3. Works, George Offor edition, Vol. 3.

lishment lasted longer, and been wise and far-seeing enough, could they not have comprehended Bunyan and harnessed his great gifts?)⁴ So what then of our great and learned Puritan, John Owen? Shall we not now recognise that he will be equally difficult to place in any modern category, and that again we will need to dig beyond a later mythology to understand Owen as he was- a man of the seventeenth century? Again, let's tackle some more mythology first.

John Owen-CONGREGATIONALIST. A contemporary publisher introduces Owen to us in this way; "Owen (1616-1683) is regarded by many as one of the greatest Christian theologians England ever produced. He entered Oxford at 12. *He was originally a Presbyterian but later became convinced of the Congregational form of church government.* He pastored several churches before becoming Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, a position he held for five years"....⁵. That's clear enough. Now take the influential "Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government", where we find editor David W. Hall coolly informing us that; "In the midst of the meeting of the Westminster Assembly there were a number of delegates *at the Assembly* who, although quite respected, also held to the congregationalist form of government. These independents- including *John Owen*, Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, and Jeremiah Burroughs- wished to contend for the independent view of Church government *even at the Westminster Assembly*. They became known for their skill in obstruction and protestation, being such a small but effective minority".⁶ Here we see mythology developing right before our eyes. Owen is a rabid Congregationalist. So much so that he took his Congregationalism and fought its corner right there in the Westminster Assembly (where, of course, he never set foot at all! ⁷.) Unfortunately the mythology is widespread and prevailing. I have heard of Presbyterian pastors and students in America who will not read *anything* by Owen, as a matter of settled policy. They might get some good, but there is always the danger of that invidious independency- and it just might *get to them!* Obviously the time has come to let Owen speak for himself, and if we can't put the results into a neat box and label it then the problem is our's, not

4. Compare the following; "Upon information that David Evans, a lay person, had taken upon himself publicly to teach or preach among the Welsh in the great valley, Chester County, it was unanimously agreed that the said Evans had done very ill and acted irregularly in thus invading the work of the Ministry, and thereupon was censured. Agreed that the most proper method for advancing David Evans in necessary literature to prepare him for the work of the Ministry is, that he lay aside all other business for a twelve-month, and apply himself closely to learning and study under the direction of Mr. Andrews, and with the assistance of Mr. Wilson and Mr. Anderson, and that it be left to the discretion of the said Ministers when to put the said Evans on trials, and licence him publicly to teach or preach." **Minutes, Presbyterian Church, U.S., Philadelphia, 1710.**

5. Publisher's 'Introduction' to John Owen's *'Biblical Theology'*, Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1994.

6. David W. Hall, 'Bibliographical Essay' in *'Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed & Presbyterian Church Government'*, Eerdmans, 1994.

7. "During the deliberations of the Assembly Nye and Goodwin almost alone maintained the distinctive elements of congregationalism- in some instances Nye alone." William Hetherington, *"History of the Westminster Assembly"* (1856) 1993, p.412

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his. It is a fascinating fact that we *could* use extracts from Owen's writings to come to a short and easy solution to the question, and present Owen as the good, orthodox Presbyterian after all (but as we shall see that in itself could be deceptive!).

Was Owen amongst those obstructive Independents at Westminster? Of course not, and even Hall doesn't seriously think so. That is a editorial blunder not of cosmic but of comic proportions.⁸ (But will all his readers, including the many students to whom this will be an 'assigned text' know that?) Asked for his opinion as to why the Independents and Presbyterians did not agree at Westminster Owen points out that; "*I was none of them, and cannot tell*"⁹

So what was Owen's preferred ecclesiology? "The principles and rules of that church government from which, in the following assertions, I desire not to wander, are of that kind (to which I do, and always, in my poor judgement, have adhered, since, by God's assistance, I had engaged myself to the study of his word), which commonly are called *presbyterial or synodical*, in opposition to prelatical or diocesan on the one side, and that which is commonly called *independent or congregational* on the other."¹⁰ Plain enough one would think, especially as, earlier in the same work Owen severely takes the two extremes of Congregationalism on the one hand and Prelacy on the other severely to task; "Some would have all Christians to be *almost ministers*; others *none but ministers* to be God's *clergy*. These would give the people the keys, those 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 if there were no habitable earth between the valley (I had almost said the pit) of *democratical confusion* and the precipitous rock of *hierarchical tyranny*"¹¹. So Owen is a professed Presbyterian and moreover one who regards Independency as (almost) "a pit of democratical confusion"! Here we might well rest our case, and that case would be that Flavel, Bunyan and Owen were all ecclesiastically within the broad portfolio of Presbyterianism, all *might* have been included within a national Presbyterian establishment, that Presbyterianism was at root the consensus found in the Scriptures by all sincere students of the Word, that Presbyterianism was thus the prevailing orthodoxy, that competing theories (Congregationalism, Prelacy, Immersionism) were far more *minority* views then

8. There are worse about. Readers of '*Unholy Hands on the Bible, Vol II*', Jay Green. Sen. Editor, will be aware of some superb defence material for the received text and the King James Bible. But the cause is hardly helped by an essay by one Luther Martin, in which he lists some early canons of the New Testament, and tells us that one such includes "Paul's letters to the Galatians, Ephesians, FILIPINOS....." Did Paul get as far as Manila? Or does no-one proof-read before printing any more?

9. '*Works*' Vol. 15. p.433.

10. '*Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished*', 1643. '*Works*' Vol.13. p.39.

11. *ibid.* Preface, p.5.

than our historical perspective allows for, and that only the political upheavals and chaos, the 'hothouse' atmosphere of the Republic and the proliferation of cults, then restored Erastianism, hierarchialism, persecution and tyranny prevented such an outcome. Unfortunately there we cannot close, for two points should have already suggested themselves to most readers; a) the 'Presbyterianism' suggested would have had to be a flexible, questioning, living thing, and not a rigid platform imposed without discussion and compromise, and b) John Owen certainly did write a lot more on ecclesiology than the work quoted above, much of it later, and much of a rather different tone.

Taking these in order; again we need to mentally roll back the years, divorce ourselves from our own age (and our knowledge of Presbyterian history in the interim) and try to see and feel the atmosphere at the time of the Westminster Assembly. Taste the excitement, savour the possibilities. God is doing great things, the Spirit is moving in the land, the vision is boundless. Great men of God are suddenly, wonderfully, freed for the battle against Laudian prelacy, free to model the Church according to Scripture, and Scripture alone. Behind them stood the Reformers, the example of Geneva, Knox and the Scottish experience, the testimony and written legacy of their own suffering English Presbyterian leaders, of Cartwright and of Travers, of the men who issued 'Smectymnuus' against Prelacy, and the carefully worked out 'Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici' against Independency.¹² The London ministers who would be so influential at the Assembly, were not the men to take *anything* 'as read' or suffer any teaching or practice to be imposed on them without overwhelming Scripture proof. So here we take our first lesson for today; *true Presbyterianism is a Divine Right system, not a conveniency or 'the best working model there is', but a requirement mandated by God.* And our second; "*true Presbyterianism is constantly seeking to discover the extent of it's Jus Divinum, by applying the regulative principle of Scripture to more and more of it's structure and practice.*" I would submit that it is just these two principles which allow Presbyterianism its *flexibility* within *fixed and determined parameters* which is it's true strength and genius. I would suggest also that— mainly because of the political events and suppressions of the crucial period in history we are trying to understand— subsequent Presbyterianism has failed to grasp this, has lost the vision and deteriorated into two camps (often beneath the surface, frequently within the same Denominations and groups), the one of which really sees no 'Jus Divinum' in the system at all and the other takes temporary 'working models', puts them into tablets of stone, and at once become as inflexible as stone themselves. It is because of this (tragically) that Presbyterianism has nowhere, ever, worked out it's full potential

12. 'Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici'. or *The Divine Right of Church Government*, originally asserted by the Ministers of Sion College, London, December, 1646', Naphtali Press reprint, 1995. (Essential reading. Contact this writer if you want a copy!).

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(B.M.Palmer). The Presbyterian 'learning-curve' of the 1640/50s *could have* included, comprehended, learned and benefited from England's Bunyans and Owens. It was not the Westminster Presbyters fault that it failed to do so. *It may be our fault if we continue to exclude them from our thinking today, if we seriously plan to re-establish Biblical Presbyterianism here again.*

Let us return to John Owen, and the crucial question- was Owen nearer to Independency or Presbyterianism? Here we come full circle, and arrive back at the theory ; "originally a Presbyterian, he later became convinced of the Congregational form of Church government". After all the forthright Presbyterianism of the above quote is *early* Owen (1643), and for a man who was so constantly searching the Scriptures as Owen there was plenty of time to change and develop his understanding. This is the theory also of Owen's editor William H.Goold; "Owen here declares himself to be in sentiment a Presbyterian, in opposition to Prelacy and Independency. *He afterwards changed his views on Church government.*"¹³ But did he? And if so- how radically? In 1657 Owen wrote "A Review of the True Nature of Schism" subtitled; "A Vindication of the Congregational Churches of England from the Imputation Thereof". So between 1643 and 1657 Owen has become a champion of Congregationalism. That's clear enough, especially when it is remembered that the charge of 'Schism' came from a Presbyterian, Daniel Cawdrey. That is, until you note that in the latter work Owen refers back to his earlier book, and comments; "When I compare what I then wrote with my present judgement, I am scarce able to find the least difference between the one and the other", and as to that oft-repeated claim of his 'change in sentiments' hear Owen himself; "impartial men will be willing to give me an acquitment *from the charge of altering my judgement* in the matters of our present difference."¹⁴ And why is it that in some of his latest writings on the Church (in 1689) Owen was accused of "Returning to the Presbyterianism of his youth?"¹⁵ A change of view, a reversion- all very confusing? Perhaps not so if you remember what has been said about definitions and terminology, of semantics, for this is precisely where Owen himself judges the problem to lie; "only a misapplication of names and things....gives countenance to the charge."¹⁶ So we have Daniel Cawdrey a rigid Presbyterian, and John Owen a 'would-be' Presbyterian if, perhaps, non-essentials were not being insisted on as essentials, and dialogue and flexibility were still on the table; "Had the presbyterian government been settled at the king's restoration....without the rigorous imposition of everything supposed by any to belong thereunto....if there had been any separation between the parties, I do judge that they would have been both to blame."¹⁷

13. Goold, 'Prefatory Note' to *'Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished'*. 'Works'; Vol 13, p.2.

14. 'Works' Vol 13, p.222.

15. Goold, 'Prefatory Note' to *'The True Nature of a Gospel Church'*. 'Works'; Vol.16, p.2.

16. 'Works' Vol. 13, p.223.

17. 'Works' Vol. 15, p.443.

Now let us stand back and take a wide screen view of the essentials of Presbyterianism, and then apply the result to Owen. John M. Otis in "Distinctives of Biblical Presbyterianism" (1985) sums these up as follows:—

1. PRESBYTERIANISM BELIEVES IN THE INNERANCY OF SCRIPTURE.

So did John Owen. In fact his innerancy goes far further, in terms of providential preservation of the text of the Bible, than most conservatives today. See his 'Divine Original of the Scriptures' (1659), 'Excercitationes Adversus Fanaticos' (1658, translated as appendix to 'Biblical Theology', 1994), and sections of Theologoumena (1662, translated as 'Biblical Theology', 1994).

2. PRESBYTERIANISM IS A CREEDAL AND CONFSSIONAL DENOMINATION.

Owen worked on the Savoy Confession, and prepared catechisms for his people. Owen was more concerned with the abuse of confessions- that the civil magistrate might not abuse them to an enforced and persecuting 'orthodoxy'. See his 'Power of the Civil magistrate about Religion' (1659). Works Vol. 13.

3. PRESBYTERIANISM HAS A COVENANTAL VIEW OF SCRIPTURE.

The whole major "Theologoumena/Biblical Theology" is a development of God's covenantal working through Biblical history. Owen repeatedly stresses a Jewish/covenantal, over against a Greek/philosophical methodology for interpreting Scripture. He is a covenant theologian of the first order.

4. PRESBYTERIANISM IS AN AFFIRMATION OF HISTORIC CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES.

The greater part of Owen's massive literary output is dedicated to defence of historic Christian doctrines- contra Rome, contra Socinians, contra Arminians.

5. PRESBYTERIANISM AGREES WITH THE FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM.

Owen is one of the greatest defenders of full '5 point' Calvinism. See his controversy with Richard Baxter over any watering down of the entire five points in the direction of Amyraldianism.

6. PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE THAT THE SCRIPTURE TEACHES ONLY TWO SACRAMENTS- THE LORD'S SUPPER & BAPTISM.

See 'The Church of Rome no Safe Guide' on spurious 'sacraments' and 'On Infant Baptism and Dipping'. (Cf. Works Vols.14 and 16.)

7. PRESBYTERIANISM BELIEVES IN A PLURALITY OF LEADERSHIP CONSISTING IN TWO OFFICES ORDAINED BY GOD.THESE OFFICES ARE a)ELDER AND b)DEACON.

"The officers of a Church in general are of two sorts, "bishops and deacons". The bishops or elders are of two sorts:- :1. Such as have authority to teach and adminis-

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ter the sacraments, and also of ruling: and 2. Some ‘ have only power for rule. Owen; ‘The True Nature of a Gospel Church and It’s Government’ (1689). See especially Cap. vii ‘On the Rule of the Church, or Ruling Elders’, and cap ix ‘Of Deacons’. (We will need to refer to 2-office/ 3-office differences below.)

8. PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE THAT ELDERS ARE ORDAINED BY GOD TO EXERCISE SPIRITUAL OVERSIGHT OVER THE CONGREGATION. ELDERS ARE ELECTED BY THE CONGREGATION.

Much of ‘The True Nature of a Gospel Church’ supports the rights and roles of the local eldership (presbytery). In the early (‘Presbyterian’) ‘Duties of pastors and People’ (1643) Owen stresses the ‘consent of the people’, and in the late (‘Independent’) ‘True Nature of a Gospel Church’ (1689), the Church’s rights and responsibilities in ‘calling or choosing’ its Pastor are stressed. (For un-presbyterian denial of the peoples’ rights see below.)

9. PRESBYTERIANISM IS A CONNECTIONAL CHURCH: IT’S GOVERNMENT IS COMPRISED OF LOWER AND HIGHER COURTS WHICH HAVE AUTHORITY OVER SINGLE OR MULTIPLE CHURCHES.

No one will dispute that many of the above categories might be agreed by non-presbyterian ‘Reformed’, and that this section alone enters into the heart of the Independent-Presbyterian dialogue. Agreed- but note that already we have Owen an 8-out-of-9 points man; closer to us that any ‘4-point’ Calvinist, even though of impeccable ‘Presbyterian credentials’. *Owen is already proven the better Presbyterian than Baxter!* Our insight into Owen’s belief here will come from his ‘locus classicus’ on the subject, cap. xi of ‘True Nature of a Gospel Church’, entitled; ‘Of the Communion of Churches’ (‘Works’, Vol 16 p.183 on.)

“Herein then, we acknowledge, lieth the great difference which we have with others about the state of the Church of Christ in this world” (p.185). Owen proceeds to demolish the false unity of the Roman Church under a visible head, and to clarify which Churches may qualify for a true communion of Churches, i.e. those professing the same faith and practice. The true union is their “existing *union with or relation to Christ their head*” (p.189). Such Churches have already “joint actings in the same gospel duties towards God in Christ” and so may have “mutual actings towards each other with respect to their institution and being, which is the glory of Christ in the edification of the whole catholic church” (p.191). “The bond of this union is love” (p.194), whilst “the outward acts of communion among churches, proceeding from this love, may be referred unto two heads of *advice and assistance*”.

“Churches have communion unto their mutual edification by advice in synods and councils. *Synods are the meeting of diverse churches by their messengers or delegates to consult and determine of such things as are of common concernment unto*

them all by virtue of this communion which is exercised in them". (p.195). "This acting in synods is an institution of Jesus Christ, not in an express command, but in the nature of the thing itself, fortified by apostolical example." "Truth, peace, and love may be lost among churches, and so the union of the catholic church in them be dissolved, unless this means for their preservation and reparation be made use of" (p.196). "Where there has been any *maladministration of discipline*, whereby any members of the church have been injured- as suppose they are unduly cast out of the church by the power and interest of some Diotrephes....it is necessary, from the communion of churches and the interest the persons injured have in the catholic church, whose edification is the end of all church administrations, that the proceedings of such a church be reviewed by a synod, and a remedy be provided in the case." "If it be reported, or known by credible testimony, that any church hath admitted into the exercise of divine worship any thing superstitious or vain....the church itself not endeavouring its own reformation and repentance, other churches walking in communion therewith, by virtue of their common interest in the glory of Christ and honour of the gospel, after more private ways for its reduction, as opportunity and duty may suggest unto their elders, ought to assemble in a synod for advice, either as to the use of further means for the recovery of such a church, or to withhold communion from it, in case of obstinacy in its evil ways" (p.198). "It were not amiss if those churches which do walk in express communion would *frequently meet in synods*, to enquire into the spiritual state of them all, and to give advice for the correction of what is amiss." "Here it is evident what are the *ends* of such synods amongst the churches of Christ. The general end of them all is to promote the edification of the whole body or church catholic; and that—

- 1) To prevent divisions from differences in judgement and practice,
- 2) To avoid or cure offences against mutual love among them,
- 3) To advance the light of the gospel by a joint confession and agreement of faith,
- 4) To give a concurrent testimony against pernicious heresies or errors, whereby the faith of any is overthrown, or in danger so to be, and,
- 5) To relieve such by advice as may be by any Diotrephes unduly cast out of the church." However; "The *measure or extent* of them ariseth from concernment or convenience" (p.199), and "Respect unto the causes or occasions of them, will determine what churches (which or how many) may be necessary on such occasions to constitute a synod"(p.200). As for the local presbytery; "That kind of synods which some call a *classis*, which is a convention of elders or officers of sundry parochial churches....it is the constitution of a new kind of particular churches by the combination of them into one....which probably may be done sometimes and in some places unto edification", and the General Assembly; "Church-states, whose being, bounds, and limits are given unto them absolutely by those of the civil government which they belong unto, it is thought meet that ecclesiastical synods should be accommodated. It is eminently useful unto the edification of the church catholic that all the churches professing the same doctrine of faith, within the limits of the

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same supreme civil government, should hold constant actual communication among themselves”. But; “ 1) The rights of particular churches be preserved in the free election of such as are to me members of such synods, and 2) They assume no authority or jurisdiction over churches or persons, in things civil or ecclesiastical.”(p.202- *emphasis* Owen’s throughout the above section.)

We need now to pause and take breath (as always after working with Owen) and analyse. Certainly there is much here that leans towards Presbyterianism, some things that Presbyterians have not thought about (but might do) and some things that do not agree with that system. Again, our modern boxes just do not fit, and John Owen is being consistently *Owen-ian*.

Owen’s vision is *not* of Churches which are self-sufficient, self-contained, answerable only to God. Discipline, doctrine, practice- all require *combined* action to render uniform, and to preserve in purity. This is an institution of Christ, with clear Apostolic example. Synods should meet frequently. Where there is a recognised state-church (Owen mentions specifically Scotland and France) regular synods are eminently useful and should be accommodated. The case of Diotrephes shows that discipline can only be enforced, and injustices prevented, at a wider level than a single congregation. But- Synods must assume no jurisdiction over churches or persons, in things civil or ecclesiastical; they are for advice and assistance. They are not seen as meeting at stated intervals (although frequently) but rather when required by concernment or convenience. Here we might pause to note that ‘advice’ has some ‘teeth’ and is rather more than advisory in the modern sense. If the synod ‘provide a remedy’ it is expected to be obeyed, and churches can be expelled for contumacy. What modern ‘independent’ church would accept a synod assembling ‘and using means’ to rebuke and recover it for ‘admitting superstitious or vain exercises into divine worship’! (Would that they did!).

To summarise again- in the last ‘point’ of our Presbyterian list above, when dissected and closely examined, John Owen comes out as about 60% Presbyterian, 40% Independent. And this is when we already have him as 8-points-out-of-9 Presbyterian. Nor are we the first to reach this conclusion; William Hetherington claims that “Neither Owen nor Howe were ever Independents according to Nye’s system, but approached indefinitely near to the Presbyterian system, as it existed in Scotland and Holland, and could readily have joined with these Churches. We therefore include them, and all such liberal-minded men, in the general designation of Presbyterians.”¹⁸

Now we will measure our man against another yardstick- the Congregationalist one. Where lies the essence of the ‘independent’ system? Our witness here is Ralph Wardlaw, a leading nineteenth-century Congregationalist and Independent polemic.

18. Hetherington “*History of the Westminster Assembly*’ op.cit. p.413.

Somewhat surprisingly Wardlaw does *not* place the vital essence of Congregationalism in denial of connectionalism or ‘higher courts’ and synods. Presumably, like Owen, he does not deny the utility and Biblical nature of these, and would merely dispute the timing (regular, or occasional as situations require them?) and authority (advisory or mandatory?) of synods. “We are informed by Dr. Wardlaw that the distinctive polity which he defends consists in two particulars: First that each church is entrusted with its own government; and second, that is to be conducted not by office bearers alone as representatives, but by the *office bearers and the congregation conjointly*”¹⁹. For the first Owen would agree- but he makes clear provision for the local church to serve as part of a synod, or to be approached by a synod with advice (backed by some sanctions) in cases of necessity. *The second is the true crux of difference between real presbyterianism and real congregationalism, as we understand the terms today*. Presbyterianism is government by elders representing the people; Congregationalism is government by elders and people *jointly*.

Where stands Owen on this watershed divide between the systems? “The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished” (1643) commences with a mini ‘Biblical-theology’ tracing the representative principle from the patriarchal period (heads of families, then heads of clans or tribes) “called by the law of nature, tradition or special revelation....to instruct their children and servants....in things appertaining to God” (p.8), to the Mosaic, in which “Several officers, with their distinct employments in and about the service, were so punctually prescribed and limited by almighty God, so that none of them might, without presumptuous impiety, intrude into the function of others not allotted to them, so *none of their brethren might presume to intrude into the least part of their office without manifest sacrilege* (Josh.22:11-20)” (p.13). Although Owen recognises and explains the ‘priesthood of all believers’, he goes to lengths to distinguish this from the ministerial function, and to stress the necessity of a special and divine call to take those responsibilities up. In “Eshcol; A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan”, (1647), when Goold would have us believe Owen was into his ‘independent’ period, the first words of his ‘Rule 1’ inform us that the Pastor has “Administration committed to him, by virtue of his ministerial authority”, which is to be “diligently attended and submitted unto, with ready obedience in the Lord” (p.55), and in explication Owen shows that; “Authority is *proper to them who are orderly set apart thereunto*” (p.56), whilst ‘Rule 4’ requires “Reverential estimation of him (the Pastor) with *submission unto him*, for his work’s sake” (p.58). There follow fifteen rules for ‘mutual duties in Church fellowship’, showing how the body should encourage and edify and support each other and their minister. Not one even hints at a joint-administration or shared authority of the flock with their pastor!

Come a bit further forward in time, to “A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God

19. Ralph Wardlaw ‘*Congregational Independency*’ (n.d.) p.59.

John Owen: Progressive Presbyterian?

and Discipline of the Churches of the New Testament" (1667). Here surely is Independency, for this has been called "The Independent's Catechism". Question 21; "Seeing the church is a society or spiritual incorporation of persons *under rule, government, or discipline*, declare who are the *rulers, governors, or officers* therein, under Jesus Christ?" Ralph Wardlaw can answer that from the Independent point of view; "the office bearers and congregation, conjointly". Owen answers, and teaches his people to answer, "They have been of two sorts:- Extraordinary, appointed for a season only, and Ordinary, to continue until the end of the world." Extraordinary officers were "Apostles, evangelists and prophets" and ordinary officers are "elder, pastor and teacher". To *elders* (presbyters!) belongs "the rule of the church and guidance thereof" (Q.28), whilst the church (congregation) has a duty towards their elders to "obey them conscientiously" (Q.29). Question 31 asks; "Are there appointed any elders in the church whose office and duty consist in rule and government only?", with the answer "Elders not called to teach ordinarily, or administer the sacraments, but to help in *rule and government* of the Church are mentioned in Scripture- Rom.12:8, 1 Cor.12:28, 1 Tim.5:17", and is followed by a full vindication of the office of the ruling elder. And in conclusion note Q.41, "What is the discipline of the church?" ; "Herein is the *commission of the guides and rulers* of the church expressed....answerable to the distinct duties that are incumbent on the *rulers of the church* on one hand, and the *members* on the other". To multiply extracts might make us as 'prolix' as Owen himself. Wardlaw wants joint rule, Owen recognises rulers and ruled. Wardlaw says joint rule is Congregationalism. Owen teaches representative government by presbyters- teaching and ruling elders. And what shall we call *that*? Of Wardlaw's two infallible rules of Independency Owen directly contradicts one, and partially disputes the other. Our Independency measure has Owen, say, 85% presbyterian, 15% congregationalist- much the same as his 'score' at first sight from the Presbyterian measure. And that in itself is interesting and suggestive. Goold and Wardlaw were Victorian contemporaries. Goold- the *presbyterian*- wants us to believe that Owen had moved into Congregationalism. Wardlaw -the *Congregationalist* - gives us rules that clearly exclude Owen from that polity. Do we begin to get a suspicion that, perhaps, it is Goold's *kind* of Presbyterianism that denies Owen a place; even though it cannot land him in the Congregationalist camp instead?

And what does all this really mean, in terms of the man and his place in church history?

To be concluded (DV) in next issue.

We believe....that those who are rulers of the church, institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church; yet they ought studiously to take care, that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, hath instituted.

Extract: Belgic Confession XXXII.