



The
COMPLETE WORKS
of JOHN OWEN

The Gospel • Volume XIV

Apostasy from the Gospel

INTRODUCED & EDITED BY

Joel R. Beeke

The Complete Works of John Owen

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- Vol. 34 *An Exposition of Hebrews: Part 6, Hebrews 5–6*
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Shorter Works

- Vol. 39 *The Shorter Works of John Owen*

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- Vol. 40 *Indexes*

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THE GOSPEL

VOLUME 14

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GENERAL EDITORS

Lee Gatiss and Shawn D. Wright

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Volume 14

Contents

Works Preface vii

Editor's Introduction 1

Outline 67

Apostasy from the Gospel 75

General Index 403

Scripture Index 413

Works Preface

JOHN OWEN (1616–1683) is one of the most significant, influential, and prolific theologians that England has ever produced. His work is of such a high caliber that it is no surprise to find it still in demand more than four centuries after his birth. As a son of the Church of England, a Puritan preacher, a statesman, a Reformed theologian and Bible commentator, and later a prominent Nonconformist and advocate of toleration, he is widely read and appreciated by Christians of different types all over the globe, not only for the profundity of his thinking but also for the depth of his spiritual insight.

Owen was born in the year that William Shakespeare died, and in terms of his public influence, he was a rising star in the 1640s and at the height of his power in the 1650s. As chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, dean of Christ Church, and vice-chancellor of Oxford University, he wielded a substantial degree of power and influence within the short-lived English republic. Yet he eventually found himself on the losing side of the epic struggles of the seventeenth century and was ousted from his position of national preeminence. The Act of Uniformity in 1662 effectively barred him from any role in the established church, yet it was in the wilderness of those turbulent post-Restoration years that he wrote many of his most momentous contributions to the world of theological literature, despite being burdened by opposition, persecution, family tragedies, and illness.

There was an abortive endeavor to publish a uniform edition of Owen's works in the early eighteenth century, but this progressed no further than a single folio volume in 1721. A century later (1826), Thomas Russell met with much more success when he produced a collection in twenty-one volumes. The appetite for Owen only grew; more than three hundred people had subscribed to the 1721 and 1826 editions of his works, but almost three thousand subscribed to the twenty-four-volume set produced by William H. Goold

from 1850 onward. That collection, with Goold's learned introductions and notes, became the standard edition. It was given a new lease on life when the Banner of Truth Trust reprinted it several times beginning in 1965, though without some of Owen's Latin works, which had appeared in Goold's edition, or his massive Hebrews commentary, which Banner did eventually reprint in 1991. Goold corrected various errors in the original seventeenth- and eighteenth-century publications, some of which Owen himself had complained of, as well as certain grammatical errors. He thoroughly revised the punctuation, numeration of points, and Scripture references in Owen and presented him in a way acceptable to nineteenth-century readers without taking liberties with the text.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, and especially since the reprinting of Goold's edition in the mid-twentieth century, there has been a great flowering of interest in seventeenth-century Puritanism and Reformed theology. The recent profusion of scholarship in this area has resulted in a huge increase of attention given to Owen and his contribution to these movements. The time has therefore come to attempt another presentation of Owen's body of work for a new century. This new edition is more than a reprint of earlier collections of Owen's writings. As useful as those have been to us and many others, they fail to meet the needs of modern readers who are often familiar with neither the theological context nor the syntax and rhetorical style of seventeenth-century English divinity.

For that reason, we have returned again to the original editions of Owen's texts to ensure the accuracy of their presentation here but have conformed the spelling to modern American standards, modernized older verb endings, reduced the use of italics where they do not clarify meaning, updated some hyphenation forms, modernized capitalization both for select terms in the text and for titles of Owen's works, refreshed the typesetting, set lengthy quotations in block format, and both checked and added Scripture references in a consistent format where necessary. Owen's quotations of others, however, including the various editions of the Bible he used or translated, are kept as they appear in his original. His marginal notes and footnotes have been clearly marked in footnotes as his (with "—Owen" appearing at the end of his content) to distinguish them from editorial comments. Foreign languages such as Greek, Hebrew, and Latin (which Owen knew and used extensively) have been translated into modern English, with the original languages retained in footnotes for scholarly reference (also followed by "—Owen"). If Goold omitted parts of the original text in his edition, we have restored them to their rightful place. Additionally, we have attempted to regularize the numbering

system Owen employed, which was often imprecise and inconsistent; our order is 1, (1), [1], {1}, and 1st. We have also included various features to aid readers' comprehension of Owen's writings, including extensive introductions and outlines by established scholars in the field today, new paragraph breaks marked by a pilcrow (¶), chapter titles and appropriate headings (either entirely new or adapted from Goold), and explanatory footnotes that define archaic or obscure words and point out scriptural and other allusions in the text. When a contents page was not included in the original publication, we have provided one. On the rare occasions when we have added words to the text for readability, we have clearly marked them using square brackets. Having a team of experts involved, along with the benefit of modern online database technology, has also enabled us to make the prodigious effort to identify sources and citations in Owen that Russell and Goold deliberately avoided or were unable to locate for their editions.

Owen did not use only one English translation of the Bible. At various times, he employed the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, or the Authorized Version (KJV), as well as his own paraphrases or translations from the original languages. We have not sought to harmonize his biblical quotations to any single version. Similarly, we have left his Hebrew and Greek quotations exactly as he recorded them, including the unpointed Hebrew text. When it appears that he has misspelled the Hebrew or Greek, we have acknowledged that in a footnote with reference to either *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* or *Novum Testamentum Graece*.

This new edition presents fresh translations of Owen's works that were originally published in Latin, such as his Θεολογούμενα Παντοδαπά (1661) and *A Dissertation on Divine Justice* (which Goold published in an amended eighteenth-century translation). It also includes certain shorter works that have never before been collected in one place, such as Owen's prefaces to other people's works and many of his letters, with an extensive index to the whole set.

Our hope and prayer in presenting this new edition of John Owen's complete works is that it will equip and enable new generations of readers to appreciate the spiritual insights he accumulated over the course of his remarkable life. Those with a merely historical interest will find here a testimony to the exceptional labors of one extraordinary figure from a tumultuous age, in a modern and usable critical edition. Those who seek to learn from Owen about the God he worshiped and served will, we trust, find even greater riches in his doctrine of salvation, his passion for evangelism and missions, his Christ-centered vision of all reality, his realistic pursuit of

holiness, his belief that theology matters, his concern for right worship and religious freedom, and his careful exegetical engagement with the text of God's word. We echo the words of the apostle Paul that Owen inscribed on the title page of his book *Χριστολογία* (1679), "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung that I may win Christ" (Phil. 3:8).

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Editor's Introduction

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JOHN OWEN (1616–1683) wrote *The Nature of Apostasy* (1676)¹ during a time of turmoil when the spiritual influence of Puritanism in England was in retreat, ungodliness and heterodoxy were on the rise, and many of his hopes for the further reformation of Christianity in England lay shattered under an inhospitable political and ecclesiastical reality.² It is remarkable, then, that instead of capitulating to despair, Owen pressed forward in print to contend for the truth of the gospel, expose error, aid the spiritual health of Christians, promote Christ-saturated godliness, and advocate for biblical purity of worship in England and beyond. Owen's first publication, *A Display of Arminianism* (1643), and his continued polemical focus in works against Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Socinianism show that his concern for the defense and vitality of Reformed doctrine remained steady throughout his career. However, Owen's interest in theological error or apostasy was not merely doctrinal or intellectual as he saw an inextricable connection between the doctrine, worship, and holiness of life that Christians maintain and practice. He was concerned not only about the heterodox ideas plaguing the church but also the sensuality, profaneness, disobedience toward God's

- 1 The full title of the work is *The Nature of Apostasy from the Profession of the Gospel and the Punishment of Apostates Declared, in an Exposition of Hebrews 6:4–6; with an Enquiry into the Causes and Reasons of the Decay of the Power of Religion in the World, or the Present General Defection from the Truth, Holiness, and Worship of the Gospel; Also, of the Proneness of Churches and Persons of All Sorts unto Apostasy. With Remedies and Means of Prevention.*
- 2 Many thanks to Ian B. Turner for his research assistance on this volume. In this introduction, when a source is quoted more than once over more than one sentence and is the only source quoted in that section, only one citation is given at the end of the section in order to reduce annotation.

commands, and neglect or corruption of the divinely mandated elements of Christian worship to which many Christians were defecting.

Owen published *The Nature of Apostasy* during the most prolific period of his career when he wrote over half of his works.³ Other Puritans also wrote on apostasy, such as Thomas Goodwin, who devoted part of his *Discourse of Election* to the topic.⁴ However, Owen's work gave this topic "the fullest and best Puritan treatment" in a book-length discussion.⁵ For Owen, apostasy is not a matter of crossing a boldly etched line in the ground, but a steady, downward slide along a gradation of errors that can lead to destruction if one does not address and repent of it.⁶ To impress the danger of apostasy upon every Christian's conscience regardless of how strong one may think one's spiritual condition is, Owen made a pastorally insightful distinction between partial apostasy and total apostasy ("stumbling" versus "falling").⁷ In his treatise, he combined his concern for the church's purity of doctrine, holiness, and worship with his skill in dealing with the inner struggles of the Christian life—the ever-necessary fight against sin and pursuit of growth in godliness—to leave no Christian reader self-assured that he or she is free from the danger that apostasy constantly presents.

Of course, when Owen complained of the "grand defection from the truth and holiness of the gospel which is so prevalent in the world,"⁸ he was writing from a historical perspective situated in the political realities, intellectual developments, and spiritual trends of his day. When we become familiar with the realities of Owen's situation, this work—along with all his sermons, commentaries, and treatises—will more vividly jump off the page, as it were, with greater significance for us. We will therefore now consider some of the political, spiritual, moral, and intellectual currents of the time in which Owen wrote *The Nature of Apostasy*, summarize the work and its key practical applications, and offer an outline of this unique and insightful treatise.

3 Christopher G. R. Wynn, "The Essential Psychological and Theological Foundations for John Owen's Doctrine of Mortification" (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2003), 9; John W. Tweeddale, "John Owen's Commentary on Hebrews in Context," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (London: Routledge, 2012), 41; Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

4 Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), 9:150–230.

5 W. H. Davies, "The Puritan Doctrine of Apostasy," in *Puritan Papers*, vol. 2, ed. J. I. Packer (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 64. See Goodwin, *Works*, 9:185–230.

6 Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 7.

7 Owen bases this distinction on Romans 11:11. Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 1.

8 Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, "To the Reader."

OWEN AND THE POST-RESTORATION DECLINE OF PURITANISM IN ENGLAND

John Owen wrote *The Nature of Apostasy* seven years before his death with a deep awareness of “the spiritual decline of post-Restoration days.”⁹ Two days before he passed, he wrote to a friend that he was “leaving the church in a storm.”¹⁰

The External Pressures of the Restoration: Broken Hopes for Reformation

The declension of Puritanism was but one dimension of the multifaceted, society-wide upheaval effected by the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 that followed the English Civil Wars (1642–1651). Externally, by the time Owen was writing *The Nature of Apostasy* the Puritans were being oppressed by the post-Restoration political settlement, which fostered an atmosphere that was unfavorable to Puritanism. They found themselves in a “dark tunnel of persecution between 1660 (Restoration) and 1689 (Toleration)” when “the men of the Restoration systematically scattered and stamped out the fires of Puritan Christianity, as part of their public rejection of the revolutionary order” imposed during the Commonwealth (1649–1660), in which Owen played a leading part.¹¹

At the inception of these conflicts in 1643, the English parliamentarians and Scottish Covenanters made an alliance to combine forces against the royalist army and its Irish allies, sealing such alliance by subscribing to the Solemn League and Covenant. For Scottish and many English Presbyterians, this covenant was the instrument for achieving their primary goals: to secure the fruits of the Reformation in Scotland, to further the reformation of the church in England, and to extend that reformation into Ireland as well. Thus there would be an established Presbyterian church in all three kingdoms, reformed in doctrine, worship, and church order. For their allies—Cromwell and his New Model Army, a diverse amalgamation of Congregationalists,

⁹ Davies, “Puritan Doctrine of Apostasy,” 75; cf. Sinclair B. Ferguson, “The Doctrine of the Christian Life in the Teaching of Dr. John Owen (1616–1683), Chaplain to Oliver Cromwell and Sometime Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford” (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 1979), 403.

¹⁰ John Owen to Charles Fleetwood, August 22, 1683, in *The Correspondence of John Owen (1616–1683)*, ed. Peter Toon (London: James Clarke, 1970), 174; cf. Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2006), 460.

¹¹ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 29.

Baptists, and other sectarians—the Solemn League and Covenant was simply a way of securing Scottish support for the military and political dominance of the parliamentarians over the royalists.¹² Cromwell, as “the political leader of the Independents par excellence,” held this fragile unity together, but not for long.¹³

When the English Parliament executed King Charles I for treason in 1649, the Scottish Parliament crowned his son, Charles II, as king of Scotland. The presence of Charles II in Scotland prompted the English government to launch “a preemptive invasion” of Scotland in 1650, which led to the defeat of a large Scottish force at the battle of Dunbar.¹⁴ Soon the Cromwellians began associating Presbyterianism with things “Scottish” and even “Royalist,” causing the “political influence” of Presbyterians to fade even as they continued to “fight as best they could for the reformation to which they had sworn in the Solemn League and Covenant.”¹⁵ The execution of King Charles I widened the divide between Presbyterians and other Puritans because many Presbyterians regarded it as criminal regicide. Scottish Presbyterians in particular began resisting “the Cromwellian military reign” during the Commonwealth period (1649–1660). Cromwell, for his part, retaliated by thwarting Presbyterian aims in England and showing favor to his non-Presbyterian constituents.

The eve of the Restoration was a time of foreboding and growing tension. Oliver Cromwell's death in 1658 created chaos and disorder among the factions. The apparently solid Puritan front under Cromwell's leadership split before Owen's eyes into a conflicting mass of parties and sects. Less than a year later, as Owen preached before Parliament in February 1659, he sensed a palpable feeling of “national uncertainty”: “trouble” was “brewing,” “Parliament was factious and lacked good leadership,” “the army was restless, the soldiers' pay was in arrears,” and Owen had to spend “a great deal of energy trying to heal divisions among leading men in London.”¹⁶ In the face of the splintering of alliances under the Commonwealth, Owen's efforts to maintain “reconciliation and unity among the orthodox Protestants” were futile.¹⁷

12 Michael P. Winship, *Hot Protestants: A History of Puritanism in England and America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 130–48.

13 Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 4.

14 Winship, *Hot Protestants*, 142.

15 Winship, *Hot Protestants*, 142.

16 Robert W. Oliver, “John Owen—His Life and Times,” in *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and Robert W. Oliver (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 28.

17 Owen's efforts toward unity involved his production of “his first major apology for Congregationalism,” which defended the church from “the charge of schism.” The full title was *Of Schism: The True Nature of It Discovered and Considered with Reference to the Present Differences in*

The public rejection of the Commonwealth (also referred to as the Interregnum) coincided with the Church of England's publication and authorization of a revised Book of Common Prayer in April 1662; Parliament's Act of Uniformity in May, "which insisted total acceptance of this book by all clergy or forfeiture of their livings"; and the Great Ejection on St. Bartholomew's Day (August 24), "when almost 2000 Puritan clergy were expelled from their" churches.¹⁸ Adding to the chaos was a "series of . . . disasters" that hit the nation in the late 1660s—the Great Plague of 1665 (which was "Britain's last major outbreak of bubonic plague"), the Great Fire of London in 1666, and England's "defeat at the hands of the Dutch in 1667."¹⁹

Thus, as Cowan writes, the vision Owen and the Puritans had for the Reformation of "individuals, religion, the university and the magistrate" was "largely unsuccessful"; Owen himself "lost his position of influence at the very heart of the Cromwellian establishment"; and "Interregnum attempts for comprehensive national reformation were a 'dismal failure.'"²⁰ As a signer or subscriber of the Solemn League and Covenant, therefore, Owen lived through the meteoric rise and subsequent crashing and burning of Puritan hopes for the further reformation of the Church of England. National and political chaos that engulfed hopes of reformation was therefore the primary context for spiritual and moral decline during the Restoration period when Owen wrote *The Nature of Apostasy*.

The Internal Corrosion of the Churches: Moral Decline and Spiritual Ignorance

As the external political pressures mounted for the Puritans, an internal, spiritual decay also festered in their churches. In the mid-1670s, the last

Religion (Oxford: T. Robinson, 1657). Sungho Lee, "All Subjects of the Kingdom of Christ: John Owen's Conceptions of Christian Unity and Schism" (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2007), 13–14, 18, 21. Owen wrote a related work shortly after in defense of his views of the first. Titled *A Review of the True Nature of Schism, with a Vindication of the Congregational Churches in England from the Imputation Thereof Unjustly Charged on Them by Mr. Daniel Cawdrey* (Oxford: T. Robinson, 1657), this work contains, in its second chapter, an autobiographical note by Owen on what led him to embrace Congregationalism (32–37).

¹⁸ Oliver, "John Owen," 26–27.

¹⁹ Oliver, "John Owen," 31–32.

²⁰ Martyn Calvin Cowan, *John Owen and the Civil War Apocalypse: Preaching, Prophecy and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 153. Owen seems to express his sense of lost influence when he gives a disclaimer to readers of *Nature of Apostasy*: "I was not ignorant of the weakness and impertinency of all thoughts that a person of my mean condition in the world, disadvantaged by all imaginable circumstances that might prejudice the most sincere endeavors, should attempt any thing with respect unto the relief of nations or national churches, which yet are not without the verge of this fatal evil" ("To the Reader").

decade of his life, Owen was disturbed by the spiritual condition of the churches, complaining that declension was all he could see in London, that “the churches were in ruins” and increasingly indifferent to key doctrines (such as the imputed righteousness of Christ, divine election, and the sovereign grace of effectual calling), and that even “the dissenting churches were failing.”²¹ Owen complained that the Reformed churches at this time were racked with “divisions, debates, and animosities multiplied about the principal articles of our religion, whereby those tongues are divided and hands engaged in mutual intestine conflicts.”²² Also writing during these dark days, Richard Baxter recalled the revival of religion under the height of Puritan influence during the Commonwealth period: “There was a proportionable increase of truly godly People . . . where the Ministers had excellent parts, holy lives, and thirsted after the good of Souls.” As Baxter looked at his current situation, however, he could only lament: “Never were such fair opportunities to sanctifie a nation, lost and trodden underfoot, as have been in the Land as of late! Woe be to them that were the causes of it.”²³ The causes of this undoing of revival, as Owen’s *Nature of Apostasy* reveals, are complex and diverse.

The nineteenth-century editor of Owen’s works, William H. Goold (1815–1897), observed that the time in which Owen wrote this treatise—sixteen years after the restoration of Charles II (1660–1685)—was indeed one of declining morality. As he considered the possible causes of the moral decline of this era, Goold challenged the idea current among some historians of his day, such as Thomas Macaulay, that the conspicuous moral decline in post-Restoration culture was largely a reaction against the shackles of Puritan moral restraint during the Commonwealth which, when removed, allowed the vices that were repressed under the Puritans to break forth “with ungovernable violence.”²⁴ To Goold, this reading of history was dependent on simplistic exaggeration of Puritan austerity, since “the blighting influence” creeping into England during the Restoration “extended even into Puritan circles.”²⁵ Macaulay’s caricature of Puritanism seemed merely to be an echo of the “anti-

21 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 255, 271.

22 Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, “To the Reader.”

23 Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, ed. M. Sylvester (London, 1696), 96–100; cf. Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 46.

24 Thomas B. Macaulay, *The History of England* (London: Longmans Green, 1853), 188. “The years during which the political power of the Anglican hierarchy was in the zenith were precisely the years during which national virtue was at the lowest point” (190).

25 William H. Goold, prefatory note to John Owen, *The Nature of Apostasy*, in *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862), 7:2.

Puritan feeling” that “was let loose at the time of the Restoration and has flowed freely ever since.”²⁶ Against Macaulay’s one-dimensional explanation for post-Restoration moral decline, Goold pointed us to Owen’s explanation in *The Nature of Apostasy* as providing a more complex understanding involving a confluence of multiple causes of apostasy from the gospel—operative both in his day and in all ages.²⁷

In his preface to the reader, Owen demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the nature and causes of apostasy when he poses two related questions: whether it is the corruption of the doctrine of the gospel that gives rise to men’s moral wickedness or it is men’s moral corruption that makes the restoration of truth more difficult. To bring biblical clarity to such questions, and to give counsel that is applicable both within his context and beyond, Owen decides to pursue “a general inquiry [as to] what might be the secret causes and reasons whence it is that all sorts of persons, in all ages, have been so prone to apostatize from the sincere profession of the gospel in faith and obedience.”²⁸ Owen’s goal is to equip readers with a spiritual and theological toolkit to foster the biblical beliefs and practices necessary for escaping from the broad road that leads to apostasy.

Owen minces no words about the spiritual condition of his day, describing it with a vividness that signals urgent concern:

The way, paths, and footsteps of gospel-faith, love, meekness, temperance, self-denial, benignity, humility, zeal, and contempt of the world, in the honors, profits, and pleasures of it, with readiness for the cross, are all overgrown, and almost worn out amongst men, that they can hardly be discerned where they have been. But in their stead the “works of the flesh” have made a broad and open road that the multitude travel in, which, though it may be right for a season in their own eyes, yet is the way to hell, and goes down to the chambers of death; for these works of the flesh are manifest in the world, not only in their nature, what they are, but in their open perpetration and dismal effects.²⁹

Yet the regression from gospel spirituality and the rise of open sensuality were not the only marks of the apostasy as Owen discerned it. Widespread spiritual ignorance was also at work:

26 Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 21.

27 Goold, prefatory note to Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, in *Works*, 7:2.

28 Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, “To the Reader.”

29 Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, “To the Reader.”

The most are so ignorant of the mysteries of the gospel, so negligent or formal in divine worship, so infected with pride, vanity, and love of the world, so regardless of the glory of Christ and honor of the gospel, that it is no easy thing to find Christian religion in the midst of professed Christians, or the power of godliness among them who openly avow the form thereof.³⁰

Owen makes plain that his treatise does not target just one error or sect of Christendom but is all-inclusive in its application since “the state of religion is at this day deplorable in most parts of the Christian world” and even “among the generality of professed Christians, the glory and power of Christianity are faded and almost utterly lost.”³¹ All Owen could see as he looked around was the growing contagion of apostasy.³² One asks, in passing, what account would Owen give of the state of Christianity in our own day?

In response to this sad state of affairs, Owen says that rather than merely complaining about the total and partial apostasy of his day or venturing to oppose it without knowing its true causes, he sets forth his “thoughts about the nature, causes, and occasions of the present defection from the gospel and decay of holiness, with the means of preservation from its infection, and prevention of its prevalency in private persons.”³³ Thus, Owen writes with heaviness of heart and prayerfulness, confessing, “I verily believe neither my prayers nor tears have been proportionable unto the causes of them in this matter.”³⁴

As Owen says in the final chapter of his treatise, “I have no certain ground of assurance that this apostasy shall not grow, until in one instance or other of it, it swallow up all visible profession.” Nevertheless, Owen does “hope for better things, and pray for better things,” and such hope stands on a twofold foundation: first, God’s elect “that truly fear him, and diligently serve him, shall be preserved from perishing eternally, and everything that necessarily leads thereunto,” and second, “God has appointed a time and season, wherein he will not only put a stop unto this defection from the

³⁰ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, “To the Reader.”

³¹ Owen elaborates: “The whole world is so evidently filled with the dreadful effects of the lusts of men, and sad tokens of divine displeasure, that all things from above and here below proclaim the degeneracy of our religion, in its profession, from its pristine beauty and glory.” Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, “To the Reader.”

³² See Tim Cooper, “The Nature of Apostasy (1676),” in *T&T Clark Handbook of John Owen*, ed. John W. Tweeddale and Crawford Gribben (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, forthcoming), 414–38.

³³ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, “To the Reader.”

³⁴ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, “To the Reader.”

gospel, but an end also.”³⁵ This is the reality that inspires the theologian, against all odds, to write, to pray, and to hope.

OWEN'S POLEMICAL CONCERNS: ROMAN CATHOLICISM, ARMINIANISM, AND SOCINIANISM

By the end of chapter 3 in *The Nature of Apostasy*, Owen has charged the Reformed churches of his day with regressing into Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Socinianism.³⁶ Throughout Owen's other polemical and pastoral works, he expends a great deal of energy in combating these three challenges to Reformed Christianity—which “were highly significant both theologically and politically”—and “his contributions were perhaps the most significant made by an Englishman to these various controversies.”³⁷ Before defining these theological systems, it is important first to understand the Pelagianism that Owen saw as underlying all three theological systems.

Pelagianism is a key theological backdrop for Owen's polemics against Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Socinianism. Pelagianism grew out of the teaching of Pelagius (ca. 354–418), a British layman whose letters, treatises, and biblical commentaries promoted monastic asceticism and taught that human willpower, as a gift of grace, is all people need to overcome sin and sinfulness. Pelagianism denied the doctrine of original sin, asserting that humans are free from the guilt or transmitted corruption of Adam's sin and can, by the power of their human nature, live perfect lives of holiness. Augustine (354–430), who wrote voluminously on the primacy of God's grace in salvation, combated Pelagianism. In its broader usage, the term “Pelagianism” can refer to any teaching that “threatens the primacy of grace, faith and spiritual regeneration over human ability, good works and moral endeavour.” Since the sixteenth century, the term “semi-Pelagianism” has often been used with reference to anti-Augustinian thought that credits unaided human willpower with the ability to engender faith, a view often promoted out of concern to guard against spiritual lethargy.³⁸

³⁵ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 12.

³⁶ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 3.

³⁷ Trueman, *John Owen*, 33.

³⁸ Pelagius's follower Celestius was censured by the church at the Conference of Carthage in 411 and the teaching of both men was condemned at Carthage in 418 by a minor synod. D. F. Wright, “Pelagianism,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 499–501. “Final official condemnation of Pelagianism came” with a council in Ephesus in 431. Stephen P. Westcott, *By the Bible Alone! John Owen's Puritan Theology for Today's Church* (Fellsmere, FL: Reformation Media, 2010), 190.

Overall, Owen's theology was "anti-Pelagian . . . both at the level of theology and of practice" and drew plentifully from the work of Augustine, whose "anti-Pelagian treatises" helped Owen articulate "his polemics against the Arminians, the Jesuits and the Socinians."³⁹ Owen's fight against these groups, therefore, was in part a struggle against an age-old heresy. To further understand this fight, we will first define Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Socinianism in their historical contexts in general and then discuss the impact of these systems in John Owen's England in particular.

Roman Catholicism

During the first thousand years of the early church, the "the prominence of the see of Rome steadily increased" until its claim to universal authority and commitment to "certain doctrinal emphases became increasingly clear." The early medieval theology around the sixth century that centered on the monastic patterns of daily-life devotion shifted sharply with the refining of "scholasticism in the eleventh century," which saw reason as a vehicle to the truths of the faith. Medieval scholasticism was embodied in Thomas Aquinas's (1225–1274) *Summa theologica* and was anticipated in questions formulated by Peter Abelard (1079–1142), Anselm (1033–1109), and Augustine.⁴⁰

Historically, it is only after the Great Schism between Eastern and Western churches (1054) that one can identify a Roman Catholic church.⁴¹ In the Church of Rome, political and ecclesiastical power gradually merged and saw the rise of popes such as Gregory VII (1073–1085) who claimed "complete temporal power in Western Christendom." The bull of Boniface VIII (1294–1303) titled *Unam Sanctam* (1302) "not only declared that there was no salvation or forgiveness outside the one church, but that this church was to be identified with the Church of Rome under the headship of Peter and his successors." At the Council of Florence (1438–1445), this headship, embodied in the Papacy, was declared to be superior even to church councils.⁴²

The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, sparked by the theological challenges of Martin Luther (1483–1546) in his *Ninety-five Theses* (1517), was the culmination of complaints that had been mounting

³⁹ Trueman, *John Owen*, 125.

⁴⁰ J. Goldingay, "Roman Catholic Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 596–98.

⁴¹ Goldingay, "Roman Catholic Theology," 596–98.

⁴² J. W. Charley, "Papacy," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 489–90.

for centuries against the church's corruption, secularization, and sanctuary rights; the power of canon law over civil affairs; and the benefits and conduct of clergy.⁴³ The Catholic Counter-Reformation began with the scholars who debated Luther in the 1520s; climaxed with the Jesuits under Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), the Inquisition, and the Council of Trent (1545–1563); and concluded with the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) and the Treaty of Westphalia (1648).⁴⁴ Central to the theological disputes between Roman Catholics and Protestants have been the nature of grace (including humanity's role in salvation), the doctrine of transubstantiation, the relationship between justification and sanctification, the authority of tradition over Scripture, the power of the Papacy, and the proper way to worship.⁴⁵ With the Council of Trent, the distinctiveness of the Roman Catholic Church became even sharper, since Rome not only condemned Protestantism—famously declaring that “If any one shall say, that by faith alone the impious is justified, . . . let him be anathema”⁴⁶—but also “anathematized many of the doctrinal positions that had been debated in medieval Catholic theology.”⁴⁷

The Counter-Reformation was an effective campaign against Protestantism, aiming “to reform the church from within, chiefly by means of education; to preach the gospel to the lost outsider and to the heathen; and to fight against Protestantism in any shape or form, by any means, with any weapon.”⁴⁸ The Counter-Reformation is estimated to have won back “one-third of the territory that had accepted the Reformation at its widest extent, notably most of southern Germany and all of Poland” by 1600.⁴⁹

Owen and Roman Catholicism

The conflict between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in Europe was bitter and bloody, being fought not only with the weapons of philosophy and polemics but also outright warfare. Catholic-Protestant “strife in Germany lasted for thirty years, whilst in Italy, Spain, and most of Northern France, the

43 Goldingay, “Roman Catholic Theology,” 596–98; J. Atkinson, “Reformation, Catholic Counter-” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 560–63.

44 Atkinson, “Reformation, Catholic Counter-,” 563.

45 Goldingay, “Roman Catholic Theology,” 596–98.

46 Council of Trent, “Decree concerning Justification,” session 6, canon 9, in *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. Theodore Alois Buckley (London: George Routledge, 1851), 43.

47 Goldingay, “Roman Catholic Theology,” 596–98.

48 Atkinson, “Reformation, Catholic Counter-,” 560–63.

49 Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 93.

Reformation was stifled” at the cost of the lives of many martyred Protestants. The Spanish Duke of Alba inflicted suffering on Protestants in the low countries, and “King Phillip II of Spain fitted out his great Invincible Armada in 1588, with the intention of invading England, deposing Queen Elizabeth I, and restoring that nation to the Roman fold by force.”⁵⁰

In England, the effects of the ebb and flow of the Reformation were felt by everyone from king to commoner. Beginning with “the reign of King Henry VIII (1509–1547),” the Reformation “made great advances in the all-too-short reign of King Edward VI (1547–1553), and suffered a truly bloody and horrendous setback under the reign of Roman Catholic Queen Mary Tudor, known in British history as ‘Bloody Mary’ for the number of Protestants who were martyred during her reign (1553–1558).”⁵¹

England was once more claimed for the Protestant faith when Elizabeth I came to the throne. Her long reign (1558–1603) brought stability to church and state, but her policy for the church was to limit the extent of its reformation. During these years the nascent Puritan movement began its long campaign for the further reformation of their national church, a campaign that continued through the reigns of James I (1603–1625) and Charles I (1625–1649), reaching its height during the Commonwealth (1649–1660). Puritanism “was all but eradicated in England from the Restoration of the monarchy with the reign of King Charles II (1660–1685) and the reign of his openly Roman Catholic brother James II (1685–1688).” Ultimately, “King James II was prevented from bringing Britain under Roman Catholicism by the Glorious Revolution in 1688,” which brought England under the Protestant coregency of William III (1650–1702) and Mary II (1662–1694).⁵²

As Owen wrote *The Nature of Apostasy* during the reign of Charles II, there was a palpable fear that the hard-won Reformation could be entirely overthrown in England. Stephen Westcott notes that Roman Catholic agents made subtle attempts

to exploit the situation of the restoration of the British monarchy after the Puritan ascendancy, and the triumph of the High Anglican party to attempt to push matters even further towards a compromise with Rome. It might have seemed quite feasible that the reaction against Puritanism, the severity of the Clarendon Code of laws in silencing the evangelicals, and the king's

⁵⁰ Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 92.

⁵¹ Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 92.

⁵² Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 92.

ambiguous religion, all might set up an unstoppable chain-reaction that might sweep the nation back into the Roman fold.⁵³

In this tense post-Restoration environment, Franciscan friar John Vincent Canes wrote *Fiat Lux* (1661), which argued that England should return to Roman Catholicism. Canes pointed out that “all of the strife about religion sprang from” the Reformation, before which “all was peace and tranquility.” Further, England had been through much upheaval in the religious and political realms, including the Civil Wars, the Commonwealth, military rule, restoration of the monarchy, battles between Puritans and Laudians, “the overthrow of the Bishops, the attempted Presbyterian settlement,” and “the hot-house growth of so many sects under the Commonwealth.” Thus, Canes claimed, the English people were fatigued by all the theological, political, and military strife. Simply surrendering to Roman Catholicism, therefore, would bring to many people’s lives welcome tranquility, building upon the stability of the restored monarchy.⁵⁴

In 1662, Owen prepared an anonymous response to *Fiat Lux* titled *Animadversions on a Treatise Entitled Fiat Lux* (1662). A rejoinder to Canes’s response to *Animadversions* appeared in 1664 as *Vindication of the Animadversions on Fiat Lux*. In *Animadversions*, Owen refutes each section in *Fiat Lux*, including the claims that only the Roman church can identify Scripture as Scripture and interpret it, that there is no religion superior to popery, and that Roman Catholicism is truly innocent and unblameable. Owen’s reply to these and other points is multifaceted. He argues that Scripture predates Rome (which is a recipient, not an author, of Scripture), that by slighting the Bible’s authority Rome resembles paganism more than Christianity, and that Rome’s claim to superiority is problematic since the gospel emerged first from Jerusalem, not Rome.⁵⁵ Further, he contends that Rome’s claim of innocence would be

53 Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 91, 93.

54 Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 94–95.

55 The debate on this topic has often involved contention over whether Jesus was referring to Peter as the “rock” in Matthew 16:16–18. Roman Catholics claim that Peter—and by association Rome—is the foundation of the church, and thus papal infallibility is supported. Many Protestants have argued that the “rock” is the confession “you are the Christ” (v. 16), in which case it is faith in who Christ is that builds his church. R. C. Sproul, *What Does It Mean to Be Born Again?*, The Crucial Questions Series, vol. 6 (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2010), 63. It is interesting to see Owen dealing with this passage in the context of arguing that when one loses a sense of the glory and excellency of Christ’s person and offices, a direct road to apostasy is hazardingly near. Owen writes that the confession was the foundation of the church, for it “expresses the glory both of his person as the Son of the living God, and of his offices as the Christ,” and that whoever does not hold to a vital sense of the glory and excellencies of Christ’s

easily overturned if one could “ask the Albigenians, the Waldenses, the Lollards and other martyrs where this innocence and unblameableness lies”; that the Roman Mass is a blasphemous “insult to Christ and his redeeming work” because it “makes Christ suffer repeatedly, with a sacrifice that is never finished”; and that the Roman teaching that good works can contribute in part toward redemption because of their meritorious quality contradicts the teaching of Scripture.⁵⁶

Other anti-Roman Catholic polemics appear in various works of Owen, such as *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* (1644), *Exercitations on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1674), *The True Nature of a Gospel Church* (1689), and *A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God* (1667). In these works Owen charges Rome with corrupting corporate worship by changing the nature of the Lord's Supper,⁵⁷ corrupting the biblical idea of the priesthood,⁵⁸ unjustly using physical punishment to enforce its polity and religion,⁵⁹ violating the second commandment, and not following Scripture in their worship practice.⁶⁰ With an eye to the practices of (Laudian) Anglicanism and Romanism, Owen contends “that the church has no right or power to institute anything new in the worship of God, and that the attempt to do so is the root of all superstition.”⁶¹ Owen thus contends with Rome on the basis of what has been called the “regulative principle” in Reformed Christianity.

person will become arrogant and susceptible to foolish errors. Thus, “the whole foundation of all gospel faith” is “this glory of his person and offices (Heb. 1:2–3; Col. 1:15–19).” Only this knowledge of Christ will make all other things in comparison with him seem like rubbish (Phil. 3:8, 10). Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 7.

- 56 Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 103–4, 113, 118; Lee, “All Subjects of the Kingdom of Christ,” 25–28; cf. Aaron Prelock, “John Owen's Theology of Pastoral Ministry: An Evaluation of His Ecclesiology Viewed through the Lens of Pastoral Theology” (ThM thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2016), 24–27.
- 57 John Owen, *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished, or, A Briefe Discourse Touching the Administration of Things Commanded in Religion Especially concerning the Means to Be Used by the People of God, Distinct from Church-Officers, for the Increasing of Divine Knowledge in Themselves and Others* (London: Philemon Stephens, 1644), 25–27.
- 58 Owen, *Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished*, 17–28; John Owen, *Exercitations on the Epistle concerning the Person of Christ. Wherein, the Original, Causes, Nature, Prefigurations, and Discharge of that Holy Office, Are Explained and Vindicated. . . . With a Continuation of the Exposition on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Chapters of the Said Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Nathaniel Ponder, 1674), 2–3.
- 59 John Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church and Its Government* (London: William Marshall, 1689), 29–31, 90–92, 190–91, 196–97.
- 60 John Owen, *A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God, and Discipline of the Churches of the New Testament, by Way of Question and Answer; with an Explication and Confirmation of Those Answers* (n.p.: n.p., 1667), 49, 61–65; Owen, *Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished*, 26–28.
- 61 Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 585.

Expounding the second commandment, the Westminster divines formulated this regulative principle as follows: "The second commandment requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in his word . . . [and] forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his word."⁶² Thus, "worship is by divine warrant, command, prescription"; "whatever we do in worship must have biblical warrant"; and worship based on human imagination is idolatry.⁶³ Owen discerned that the worship practices of the Roman Catholic Church engender a kind of superstition that "suffocated genuine spirituality." Being historically Trinitarian, as Owen believed the Roman Catholics were, was not enough because "their devotional practices fostered superstition and self-reliance rather than resting in the finished work of Christ and the transforming power of the Spirit," which is a subversion of the practical implications of Trinitarianism.⁶⁴

The argument against the worship practices of the Roman Catholic Church is not merely that it violates the regulative principle; a more deeply rooted error is the fact that the Roman church has no principle of *sola Scriptura* and makes church tradition a source of equal authority with the Scriptures. Against contemporary Roman Catholic apologists who argued that the authoritative interpreter of the Scriptures was the Roman Catholic Church, Owen insisted that "the only unique, public, authentic, and infallible interpreter of Scripture is none other than the Author of Scripture Himself" who gives guidance through specific passages and the general sense of the wider context. It is therefore the duty of every person to learn, expound, and declare God's self-disclosed revelation.⁶⁵

Moreover, Roman Catholicism was not only apostate in terms of "false doctrine and idolatrous worship,"⁶⁶ but also "has given the most eminent

62 The Westminster Larger Catechism, q. 50–51.

63 John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 465, 468–70. "Reformed writers often compare this regulative principle with the view of Lutherans and Anglicans, that whatever is not forbidden is permitted" (465). See the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), sec. 21.

64 Kelly M. Kapic, "John Owen's Theological Spirituality: Navigating Perceived Threats in a Changing World," in *John Owen Between Orthodoxy and Modernity*, ed. Willem van Vlastuin and Kelly M. Kapic (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 55, 69.

65 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 194; John Owen, *A Defense of Sacred Scripture against Modern Fanaticism*, trans. Stephen P. Westcott, in *Biblical Theology: The History of Theology from Adam to Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994), 769–894, esp. 795, 797.

66 Lee, "All Subjects of the Kingdom of Christ," 25–28; cf. Owen, *True Nature of a Gospel Church*, 12–13.

example of apostasy” from the holiness of life that the gospel requires. More than “any church in the world,” says Owen, the Romish Church exhibits this kind of apostasy, not just as a kind of prototype for “whatever of the same nature befalls others,” but even as the source where “this apostasy began, and by which it is principally promoted.”⁶⁷ Owen therefore argues that Rome’s “distinctive dogmas and practices, its priesthood and hierarchy, its origin, development and track record over time have all been exposed and found wanting,” for Roman Catholicism contradicts “the word, lacks the Spirit, and has no sure promise of salvation.”⁶⁸

After the Restoration and during a brief time leading up to it, Owen shifted his polemical strategy against Roman Catholicism to frame it as a defense of Protestantism in general, the English monarchy, and the Church of England.⁶⁹ He praised Charles II as “not only the greatest Protestant but the greatest potentate in Europe.”⁷⁰ He presented himself as “a defender of the Church of England and its statement of faith,” the Thirty-Nine Articles.⁷¹ In his promotion of a generic English Protestantism, he admitted to “the lack of value of confessions of faith,” which “may reflect his despair at being able to gain public acceptance for even the simplest statement of religious ‘fundamentals’ during the 1650s.”⁷² Yet even as “he was arguing in print that he had accepted the Restoration settlement, he was actively seeking to evade its rigor, and to escape its jurisdiction” in his brief consideration of a move to New England. Even as *Θεολογουμενα Παντοδαπα* (1661), *Animadversions* (1662), and *A Vindication* (1664) went on the offensive against Roman Catholicism, these works “represent[ed] a brief capitulation to some of the central intellectual concerns of early Restoration culture.”⁷³ Despite Owen’s polemics, by the late 1660s Roman Catholicism was again becoming “fashionable at court,” and by the mid-1670s, around the time *The Nature of Apostasy* was written, “Owen, who had written millions of

67 Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 9.

68 Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 145.

69 “Much of Owen’s writing in and after the summer of 1662 must have dismayed his admirers and friends. *A Discourse concerning Liturgies, and Their Imposition* may have appealed to the old verities of the Independent party, but *Θεολογουμενα Παντοδαπα* had already illustrated Owen’s movement away from scholastic theological method, and the texts that followed it represented a much broader social and political shift. . . . [They] represented an entirely different genre of theological polemic, and were by far the wittiest and most playful of his writing to date.” Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 218.

70 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 220; Owen, *A Defense of Sacred Scripture*, 797.

71 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 221.

72 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 222.

73 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 223.

words to clarify Protestant theology, could not understand the evil days on which he had fallen. . . . Despite his best efforts," it seemed "his extraordinary project of refining the Reformation had failed."⁷⁴

Generally, Owen's regard for Roman Catholicism "as hopelessly corrupt and idolatrous" was in keeping with the "anti-Roman rhetoric which was staple for Reformed Orthodox theologians."⁷⁵ More specifically, in the decade that *The Nature of Apostasy* was written there was a real feeling of the danger that the Reformation could again be lost in England because of the advance of Roman Catholicism.

Owen and the Scholastic Method

In light of Owen's denunciation of Roman Catholicism, some readers may be surprised to find him using scholastic terminology and concepts, which are often associated with Roman Catholic doctrine. However, Owen used this method to clarify his own theological points, just as many other Reformed theologians did.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 242, 260.

⁷⁵ Trueman, *John Owen*, 26.

⁷⁶ When scholars discuss Owen's use of the scholastic method, care must be taken to avoid unhelpful ways of framing the relationship between scholasticism and Protestant Reformed theologians. Much of current scholarship views "the post-Reformers . . . as having injected a cold, systematic scholasticism into the doctrines of faith and assurance, thereby supplanting the warm biblicism of the Reformers." Joel R. Beeke, "Faith and Assurance in the Heidelberg Catechism and Its Primary Composers: A Fresh Look at the Kendall Thesis," *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 39. Westcott explains that as the Puritan hopes for religious reformation across England, Scotland, and Ireland and a "national establishment along Presbyterian lines" faded after the Restoration and Great Ejection, there came a "serious need for all dissenters to work together to have any sort of hearing," which had the effect of muting the importance of the precision of confessional distinctives and concerns over "regulative principle issues." The tendency then became popular among Dissenters to pit confessional formulas against the Bible in the name of "the Bible alone as our confession!" "To this day," Westcott argues, "the legacy of that period and that philosophy dominates the free evangelical and broadly Reformed scene in Britain, and in much of the English-speaking world," such that "it is assumed that Owen was a scholastic, and that, by implication, later men moved on and became biblically free." Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 593–94. Generally, "to equate the use of syllogisms or Aristotelian language with either a commitment to Aristotle as an equal source of theological authority to scripture or of an incipient rationalism of the kind which found its mature expression in the work of Descartes is entirely misleading and extremely unhelpful." Trueman, *John Owen*, 8. Van Asselt and Muller have convincingly challenged the assertions "that Protestant scholasticism fostered a drift away from Calvin and the fresh theological insights of the Reformation" and "that the scholastic structure of this Reformed tradition was rationalistic in such a way that it necessarily undermined the fresh faith discovered in the Reformation movement." They have demonstrated "the fundamental continuity between the theology of the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the Post-Reformation." Willem van Vlastuin and Kelly M. Kapic, "Introduction, Overview

Scholasticism was a methodology of teaching and inquiry in the medieval university system that used various forms of debate to dispute (i.e., refute or establish) a thesis, similar to a legal court case wherein a “subject was stated, challenged, defined, opposed, and finally adjudicated.”⁷⁷ As a method of theology and philosophy it began in the ninth century and thrived between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. It became known for applying complex and highly nuanced categories, definitions, and distinctions to theological and philosophical issues and using “the fundamental qualities, clearness, conciseness, and richness of technical phrase.”⁷⁸ Thomas Barlow, Owen’s tutor, divided the development of

scholastic theology into three basic historic periods: 1020 to 1220, marked by the development of sophisticated rationales for the Roman Papal Supremacy and doctrines such as transubstantiation; 1220 to 1330, when the church came to terms with the impact of Aristotle’s metaphysical treatises in the realm of theology; and 1330 to 1517, the worst (*pessima*) age, when theologians became increasingly absorbed in abstract and speculative questions.⁷⁹

In the period of early Reformed orthodoxy, from 1563 to about 1640, “Reformed theology began to establish itself in the universities, work out and elaborate the basic positions established by the earlier generations, and consequently to develop a methodological sophistication and self-awareness which led to the more obvious appropriation of the traditional language and methods of medieval scholasticism.” This included the simultaneous appropriation of technical vocabulary and metaphysical categories and the rejection of medieval notions such as transubstantiation.⁸⁰

Therefore, scholasticism influenced the theological method of post-Reformation Protestant theologians like Owen, whose adaptation of scholastic methodology sought to “understand the practical operations of spiritual things through the various levels of causation,” “to develop a logical coherence to their biblical theology,” and “to develop a more defined system of

and Epilogue,” in *John Owen Between Orthodoxy and Modernity*, ed. Willem van Vlastuin and Kelly M. Kapic (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 8–9.

⁷⁷ Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 596.

⁷⁸ William Turner, “Scholasticism,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles G. Herbermann, vol. 13 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1911).

⁷⁹ Trueman, *John Owen*, 9, 22.

⁸⁰ Trueman, *John Owen*, 6, 21; cf. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003).

understanding the ways in which God works.”⁸¹ Owen’s use of “Protestant scholastic theology . . . was more Christ-centered and less argumentative and metaphysical” than “medieval scholasticism.”⁸²

Readers may already be familiar with some key elements of Aristotelian logic as used in scholasticism. Syllogisms, for instance, involve “the combination of premises to produce *inferences*” where a major premise (e.g., “All human beings are mortal”) is joined to a minor premise (“Socrates is a human being”), leading to a conclusion (“therefore, Socrates is mortal”). If the premises are undisputed, the conclusion is considered valid. Another key element of Aristotelian logic is the “principle of contradiction,” which “demands that an argument contain no internal contradictions” (i.e., one cannot posit a thesis only later to deny it). Also key is the distinction between “essence” and “accident” where a subject (e.g., “Plato”) has certain attributes (being human, being Greek, or being wise), some of which are essential (being human) and some of which are only accidental (being wise) to the existence of the subject. Aristotle subdivided accidental attributes even further into substance, quantity, qualification, relative, where, when, being-in-a-position, having, doing, and being-affected. The scholastic distinction of essence and attributes is used in the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation to explain how “the bread continues to look like bread, and the wine like wine” when “the bread *essentially* becomes the body of Christ” and the wine “*essentially* becomes the blood of Christ.” The explanation is that the accidental attributes “of the taste, color, and form of the bread and wine” have not changed but their essential attributes have.⁸³

There is a potential for confusion over how Owen felt about scholasticism since he can be seen using terms and concepts from scholastic methodology in one place⁸⁴ while a few pages later criticizing scholasticism and the

81 Robert J. Johnson, “The Theology of Sin in the Writings of John Owen” (ThM thesis, Regent College, 1997), 133–35.

82 Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 180–81; cf. Philip Adair Craig, “The Bond of Grace and Duty in the Soteriology of John Owen: The Doctrine of Preparation for Grace and Glory as a Bulwark Against Seventeenth-Century Anglo-American Antinomianism” (PhD diss., Trinity International University, 2005), 36.

83 T. Theo J. Pleizier and Maarten Wisse, “As the Philosopher Says: Aristotle,” in *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, ed. Willem J. van Asselt (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2011), 26–44.

84 See, for instance, Owen’s discussion about God’s nature in *The Nature of Apostasy* (chap. 4), his discussion about gospel holiness (chap. 7), and his terminology about the meaning of “it is impossible” (chap. 1), where he uses “the arguments and methods of Aristotelian philosophy, as developed in Thomism and medieval scholasticism to decide which were the real properties of

“schoolmen.”⁸⁵ One of Owen’s most explicit criticisms of the schoolmen in *The Nature of Apostasy* is not an attack on scholasticism itself, but on the “pride” that “corrupted” the “endeavors of the schoolmen.” Pride, as the third major cause of apostasy that Owen discusses, found a vehicle in the method of the schoolmen. According to Owen,

Most of their disputes were such as had never had foundation nor occasion in the world, if Aristotle had not invented some odd terms and distinctions, remote from the common understanding and reason of men wiser than himself. . . . But being furnished and puffed up with a conceit of their own sagacity, philosophical ability, and disputing faculty, harnessed with syllogisms, distinctions, solutions, and most preposterous methods of craft, they came with boldness on Christian religion, and forming it to their own imaginations, dressing it up and exposing of it in foolish terms of art, under a semblance of wondrous subtlety, they wholly corrupted it, and drew off the minds of men from the simplicity of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. Not one article of religion did this proud, self-conceited generation of men leave, that (whether their conclusions were true or false about it) any man could come to the understanding of it, who had not been a better proficient in the school of Aristotle than of Christ. To believe and teach the doctrine of the Scripture, though with sound reason and judgment, and in the way of the Scripture to affect the minds and consciences of men without their philosophical notions, niceties, distinctions, whereby they had carved a corrupt, depraved, monstrous image of all things, and the knowledge of them, was among them to be a heretic or a blockhead. By the pride,

Deity from among the manifold and apparently contradictory attributes.” Lloyd R. Glynn, “The Life and Work of the Reverend John Owen D. D., the Puritan Divine, with Special Reference to the Socinian Controversies of the Seventeenth Century” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1942), 174. In his commentary on Hebrews, Owen demonstrated his “debt to scholastic methodology” along with the analogy of faith to “clarify . . . the dangers and consequences of the apostasy” described in Hebrews 6:4–6. Henry M. Knapp, “John Owen’s Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6: Eternal Perseverance of the Saints in Puritan Exegesis,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 34, no. 1 (2003): 49.

⁸⁵ See, for instance, Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chaps. 5, 6. Owen both participated in and was critical of the theological tradition of scholasticism. One drawback he saw in the methodology was that it did not produce the godliness that it had the potential of fostering. Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 173. “Aristotelian terminology provided a framework, a code or language, necessary to engage in learned debate at all,” so Owen used the scholastic method as a tool when engaged in scholarly debate, which is why “Owen can both use and criticize Aristotelian thought within a few pages of text.” Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 599.

confidence, and pretended subtlety of these men, was religion totally corrupted, and the fountains poisoned from whence others sought for the waters of the sanctuary. Even what was left of truth among them was so debased, so divested of its native heavenly glory, beauty, and majesty, was rendered so deformed and unsuited unto that spiritual light wherein alone it can be usefully discerned, as to render it altogether useless and inefficacious unto its proper ends.⁸⁶

Owen and other Puritans rejected the “rationalistic scholasticism” (as practiced by the schoolmen) that was “gaining strength and influence” because it gave reason and faith equal status in theology, diminished the authority of revelation, and was overly speculative, being engrossed in abstract metaphysical questions.⁸⁷ Reformed theologians like Owen had to walk carefully as they used

the accepted terminology and logic patterns within the parameters and presuppositions of Scripture, with the ever present danger of the system coming to dominate over revelation, and this degenerating into dry and metaphysical Protestant scholasticism: the very danger that Owen is conscious of and warns against.⁸⁸

Therefore, while “Owen was deeply read in the classics, in Aristotelian philosophy, in the medieval schoolmen, in Romanist theology, and the writings of heretics and Protestant sects and heretics,” he was able both to use scholastic methodology and attack its use when untethered by biblical presuppositions.⁸⁹ He used “the language and distinctions of medieval theology for his own particular theological purposes” drawing upon the medieval metaphysical tradition, especially the thought of Thomas Aquinas, and combined it “with biblical authority to create a doctrinal tour de force in countering the claims of his theological enemies.”⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 6.

⁸⁷ Johnson, “Theology of Sin in the Writings of John Owen,” 133–35.

⁸⁸ Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 593. Owen consistently guards against the misuse of the scholastic method by stressing “that Christianity can only be understood in trinitarian terms, and that the Trinity is a matter of scriptural revelation that cannot ever be deduced by logic or pure reason” (597).

⁸⁹ Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 593, 595, 597.

⁹⁰ Trueman, *John Owen*, 22, 178. Owen “predominantly” uses Aristotelian scholasticism “in the polemical arena” rather than in his “pastoral theology.” He may have used “Aristotelian thought-forms,” but “his philosophical [i.e., scholastic] and biblical thought” were not “fully integrated.”

Owen's criticism of scholasticism rose to its highest pitch in 1661 with the publication of *Θεολογουμενα Παντοδαπα*, wherein he both sets forth a theology of revelation and challenges scholastically generated "ideas that he anticipated would become the ideological foundations of the new church settlement" and the restored monarchy.⁹¹ Owen contended that "out of a mixture of philosophy, traditions, and Scripture, all corrupted and perverted," the schoolmen "have hammered that faith which was afterward confirmed under so many anathemas at [the Counter-Reformation Council of] Trent."⁹² The mention of Trent makes clear that Owen has Roman Catholic scholasticism in mind, but this was not "merely an attack on Catholic scholasticism"; rather, it expressed "the full fruit" of the "niggling doubts about method that had surfaced occasionally in his writing in the later 1650s." He increasingly believed, and by the Restoration was certain, that the scholastic method should be "abominated wherever it was found," whether in Reformed or Roman Catholic works.⁹³

Thus, Owen was a Reformed scholastic in a restricted sense, allowing the use of its logical methodology "in explicating, presenting, and defending the faith, laying out the dogmas in a systematic and reasoned way" but never supplanting Scripture as the all-sufficient, self-interpreting arbiter of the truth and always being vigilant of the "danger of logic (philosophy) breaking out of those bonds and becoming supreme."⁹⁴

Arminianism

Like Roman Catholicism, the decades-old system of theology known as Arminianism also provoked a response from Owen. Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) aroused controversy in the Netherlands by inverting the relationship between election and grace in Reformed theology, arguing that "election was subsequent to grace" and "conditional on man's response"

Sinclair Ferguson, "Doctrine of the Christian Life," 479–80; cf. Kacic, "John Owen's Theological Spirituality," 71–72.

91 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 213. Owen "argued that instead of tradition bearing witness to the reliability of Scripture, Scripture bore witness to the unreliability of tradition." On what authority, then, should one's belief in the reliability of Scripture rest? "Owen rested his argument about the authority of Scripture on the testimony of the Spirit in Scripture itself," which was "necessarily and unabashedly circular" (191).

92 John Owen, *Animadversions on a Treatise Intituled 'Fiat Lux': Or, A Guide in Differences of Religion, between Papist and Protestant, Presbyterian and Independent* (London: E. Cotes, 1662), 122.

93 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 219; cf. Gribben, "John Owen, Lucy Hutchinson and the Experience of Defeat," *The Seventeenth Century* 30, no. 2 (2015): 188.

94 Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 602–3.

and that “God does not choose anyone but instead foresees that some will choose him.” These views, rooted in Pelagianism, were advanced by Arminius’s followers in the five points of the Remonstrant Articles (1610), which state that (1) predestination is conditional, such that if God foresees that a person will believe, he chooses that person; (2) Christ died for all people, but only those who believe are actually saved; (3) a person needs God’s grace to believe; (4) but people can resist this grace; and (5) it is not clear as to whether all the regenerate will persevere.⁹⁵

The Remonstrant Articles were debated by an international delegation at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619). The delegates perceived that the Arminians were advancing a semi-Pelagian view of grace that was detrimental to the Reformed doctrines of atonement, justification, and assurance of salvation. The Synod of Dort therefore condemned Arminianism and issued the Canons of Dort, which were organized to answer each of the five points of the Remonstrant Articles. Arminianism thus took shape as “a modification of the Reformed understanding of grace in a semi-Pelagian direction”⁹⁶ and, despite its suppression initially in the Netherlands, it “spread pervasively throughout the world.”⁹⁷

By the sixteenth century, the Church of England could “be seen as broadly Reformed.”⁹⁸ By and large, most Anglicans were Calvinists. However, when twelve-year-old Owen began his studies in 1628 at Queen’s College, Oxford, the atmosphere of the college was becoming more accepting of Arminian theology, and the “predestinarian theology” of Calvinism—held to by Owen, his brother, and their father—was losing the normative status it held at the university a generation earlier. In 1630 William Laud, an antipredestinarian, became archbishop of Canterbury, the chancellor of Oxford, and “the chief promoter of Arminian ideas in the university community.”⁹⁹ At the same time, Christopher Potter, provost of Queen’s College, began criticizing the conclusions of the Synod of Dort (1618–1619).¹⁰⁰ Laud’s ceremonial embellishment of public worship thus came to be identified with Arminianism.

In the summer after Owen graduated with an MA, “Laud imposed forms [of worship] on the university that [Owen] could not accept” and repurposed

95 R. W. A. Letham, “Arminianism,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 45–46.

96 Trueman, *John Owen*, 27–28.

97 Letham, “Arminianism,” 46.

98 Cooper, “Nature of Apostasie (1676).”

99 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 30, 32, 65.

100 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 30–31.

“the institutions of the university . . . to advance the liturgical claims of the Arminian party” and to accommodate “the increasing emphasis on sacramental devotion.” In a sermon in 1647, Owen vividly depicted this Reformation-eroding, Laudian sacramentalism: “In worship, their paintings, crossings, crucifixes, bowings, cringing, altars, tapers, wagers, organs, anthems, litany, rails, images, copes, vestments—what were they but Roman varnish, an Italian dress for our devotion, to draw on conformity with that enemy of the Lord Jesus?”¹⁰¹ These modifications compelled Owen to leave Oxford in 1637.¹⁰² Owen would still, however, be ordained as a priest in 1638 by an ardent Arminian and supporter of Laud, Bishop John Bancroft (1574–1640). Around 1636, Owen began a seven-year “reading project” to study “the key ideas of the theological system that had hijacked his university,” which led to the publication of *A Display of Arminianism* (1643) and *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647).¹⁰³

Owen's *Display of Arminianism* critiqued the work of Jacob Arminius and his followers. In it he quoted “verbatim from standard Arminian writers, printed in one column, over against plain, unvarnished statements of Scripture in the second column,” framing the contrasting positions as “free will” versus “sacred Scripture.”¹⁰⁴ Owen also linked Arminianism to the work of Socinians, reflecting “the widespread fear among conservative Calvinists that the Arminian threat to soteriology could descend into a full-blown assault on the doctrine of the Trinity.”¹⁰⁵ Further, Owen characterized Arminianism as an erroneous departure from the confessional standards of Anglicanism—the Thirty-Nine Articles—arguing that by their theological innovations, Arminians “apostated from the pure doctrine of the word of God, the consent of orthodox divines, and the confession of the church of England.”¹⁰⁶ But the

101 John Owen, *A Vision of Unchangeable Mercy, in Sending the Means of Grace to Undeserved Sinners* (London: Philemon Stephens, 1646), 29; cf. Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 35.

102 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 35–36; cf. Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 75. In view of the circumstances of Owen's departure from Oxford in 1637, Owen's return to the university as Cromwell's appointee as dean of Christ Church in 1651 “must have been triumphant” (124).

103 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 36–37.

104 Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 197–98.

105 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 47.

106 John Owen, *Θεομαχία Ἀντεξουσιαστικῆ, or, A Display of Arminianisme, Being a Discovery of the Old Pelagian Idol Free-Will, with the New Goddess Contingency, Advancing Themselves into the Throne of the God of Heaven to the Prejudice of His Grace, Providence, and Supreme Dominion Over the Children of Men* (London: Phil. Stephens, 1643), 69; Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 47–48.

treatise was just as motivated by politics as it was by theology. Publishing this work in the initial months of the First English Civil War (1642–1646), Owen's dedication of the treatise to the "Lords and Gentlemen of the Committee for Religion" in the English Parliament is worded to justify the parliamentary war effort. Not long after *A Display of Arminianism* was published, Owen was offered a coveted position in the parish of Fordham, Essex, by the committee to whom the work was dedicated.¹⁰⁷ At the close of England's First Civil War, Owen's first published sermon, "A Vision of Unchangeable Mercy" (1646), argued that Arminianism was ultimately a threat to the gospel and that the war effort was "a struggle for true religion."¹⁰⁸ In fact, "the tensions provoked by" the advance of Arminianism "played a large part in triggering civil war" in the first place.¹⁰⁹

For the Reformed in England, Arminianism seemed to be "somewhat more amenable to Roman Catholicism" since "a semi-Pelagian notion of grace would seem to make faith into a kind of work and therefore to advocate that most offensive of Roman doctrines, justification by works." Another factor that closely associated Arminianism with Roman Catholicism was the Anglican Laudian party that was considered Arminian and was behind instituting conformity to a "quasi-Roman ceremonialism" in the Church of England.¹¹⁰

By the 1640s Calvinism was already in noticeable decline in England. After the Restoration, attacks against Calvinism grew more strident, impelling some Puritans to abandon Calvinism for Arminianism (as John Goodwin had done earlier), moderate their Calvinism (as had Richard Baxter),¹¹¹ or

¹⁰⁷ Owen, *Display of Arminianism*, 2; Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 53–54.

¹⁰⁸ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 75–76.

¹⁰⁹ Tim Cooper, "Calvinism among Seventeenth-Century English Puritans," in *Oxford Handbook of Calvin and Calvinism*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Carl R. Trueman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 326.

¹¹⁰ Trueman, *John Owen*, 27–28. "The Catholicism that was purportedly endorsed by Archbishop Laud" was such a concern to many in the seventeenth-century Anglican church that they were willing to align themselves with the Puritans "despite the fact that they might not endorse orthodox Calvinism specifically or 'Puritan' thought in general." Steve Griffiths, *Redeem the Time: The Problem of Sin in the Writings of John Owen* (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2001), 9.

¹¹¹ In Baxter's first book, *Aphorismes of Justification* (1649), his concerns over antinomianism (i.e., allowing misapplied notions of grace to ease one's urgency to pursue holiness) led him to "set about constructing an elaborate set of hedges designed to make very sure that none of his readers came to the conclusion that, in light of God's special distinguishing grace to the elect, they could live as they pleased." He urged believers "to supply his or her own 'Evangelical Righteousness.'" Baxter's *Aphorismes* also included critiques of Owen's soteriology (which Baxter understood as containing antinomian elements) and thus drew censure from Owen and sparked a "public spat" that developed into "a permanent bitterness between the two men." Decades later, Baxter's *A Treatise of Justifying Righteousness* (1676) taught "a threefold justification that

else “hold the line” and “defend Calvinism for all it was worth” (something Owen had done from the beginning to the end of his career). By the 1670s, the “demise of Calvinism” was “obvious to all.”¹¹²

In *The Nature of Apostasy* (1676), published thirty-three years after the appearance of his first work against Arminianism, Owen lamented the great “inroad” that Arminianism had made “on our first profession.” In this context he mentioned the work of Dutch theologian Simon Episcopius, alluding to certain “Racovian [i.e., Socinian] additions” made to Arminianism.¹¹³ Owen also denied the validity of a statement made by Arnoldus Poelenburg (1628–1666), a successor of Episcopius, that “most of the prelates and learned men in England are of their [Arminian] way and judgment.”¹¹⁴ Further, Owen spent several paragraphs debunking the assertion of John Goodman (d. 1690) that “no one father or writer of the church, Greek or Latin, before St. Austin’s time, agreed with the determinations of the synod of Dort.”¹¹⁵

The gradual changes introduced into the Church of England—which from Owen’s perspective originated with “Laud’s appointment as bishop of London” in 1628—meant not only the beginning of “the political ascendancy of the Arminians” but, as Owen believed in the early 1640s, “a high-level conspiracy to undermine the orthodox foundations” of the English church.¹¹⁶ “For many Puritans,” like Owen, “the rise of the Arminians could mean nothing less than the dismantling of the Reformation.”¹¹⁷ As Owen wrote *The Nature of Apostasy* toward the end of his career (1676), the doctrinal system that he had been contending with since his earliest work in 1643 was advancing unchecked in England, which seems to suggest that he fought a losing battle to the very last.

Socinianism

Socinianism was another doctrinal system that provoked Owen’s ire and attention. One of the central distinctives of Socinianism is denial of the deity

was completed only after a lifetime of perseverance; that repentance was a condition of the new covenant and a necessary component of faith; and ‘that Works are not excluded from being conditions of our justification’ in certain respects.” Moreover, Baxter denied the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the elect. Baxter’s trauma from the sights and experiences of the Civil Wars may have been a factor in his (over)reaction against antinomianism. Cooper, “Calvinism among Seventeenth-Century English Puritans,” 330–31, 333, 335.

¹¹² Cooper, “Calvinism among Seventeenth-Century English Puritans,” 327–30, 332.

¹¹³ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 3.

¹¹⁴ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 3.

¹¹⁵ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 3.

¹¹⁶ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 59–60; cf. Owen, *Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished*, 39–40.

¹¹⁷ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 32.

of Christ, which is why it is considered a precursor to modern Unitarianism. If Socinianism has modern tendrils in Unitarianism, it has ancient roots in Arianism.

In fact, Owen considered Socinianism as merely a new instance of Arianism under a different name.¹¹⁸ Arianism rejects the uncreated deity of Christ, denying that he is equal in essence with the Father, and stresses “the creaturely commonality of Christ with those he was to redeem and, hence, Christ’s importance as representative creature and model.”¹¹⁹ Arius (ca. 250–ca. 336) was a presbyter in Alexandria, Egypt, who created controversy by contradicting the teachings of his bishop, Alexander (d. 328), on Christ’s relation to the Father. Arius taught that God the Father’s uniqueness made it impossible for him to communicate his essence to another and that Christ, therefore, was only a special being created by God to undertake creation and disclose revelation. By the time Arius was condemned by the Council of Nicaea (325), his followers had spread his teaching well beyond Egypt.¹²⁰

After the formalization of the doctrine of the incarnation in the Nicene Creed, the Definition of Chalcedon in 451, and the summary of Christology by John of Damascus in the eighth century, the Trinitarian doctrine of Christ was largely left unchallenged until the sixteenth century when Michael Servetus (d. 1553) denied Christ’s deity and was burned at the stake for it. Other anti-Trinitarians fleeing persecution took refuge in Poland and Transylvania and, “under the guidance of Faustus Socinus and others, they spread anti-Trinitarian theology throughout Europe by means of their Racovian Catechism.”¹²¹

Socinianism arose in the sixteenth century from the teaching of Lelio Sozzini (1525–1562; in Latin, “Socinus”) and his nephew, Faustus (1539–1604). The two men were self-educated, well-travelled, and prolific lay theologians who “raised questions about the divinity of Christ,” reinterpreted his person and work, and “defended the authority of the Scriptures on rational and historical grounds, rather than on the testimony of the Holy Spirit.”¹²² After their arrival in Poland in 1579, the Sozzinis associated themselves

¹¹⁸ Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 186.

¹¹⁹ Dennis E. Groh, “Arius, Arianism,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 385.

¹²⁰ G. A. Keith, “Arianism,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 42.

¹²¹ Alan Spence, “The Significance of John Owen for Modern Christology,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (London: Routledge, 2012), 172.

¹²² I. Breward, “Socinus and Socinianism,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 649.

with the non-Trinitarian Minor Reformed Church of Poland and “began to be called Socinians.” Their anti-Trinitarian theology was given expression in the Racovian Catechism (1605), which taught that “Jesus did not die for satisfaction of sin” but “to inspire disciples to follow his example”; it also emphasized “correct knowledge as the key to salvation” and a “non-dogmatic interpretation of the Scriptures.”¹²³

The Socinian emphasis on reason over revelation is why Socinianism was “often seen as an early form of rationalism.”¹²⁴ With the “rise of a more historical and critical approach to the Scriptures and the search for a rational rather than a revealed Christianity,” Socinianism spread and became a major threat to orthodoxy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—especially as it appealed “to many distressed by bitter theological warfare, who sought a simpler biblical and more tolerant Christianity.”¹²⁵

Unfortunately, Arianism, Socinianism, and modern-day Unitarianism go hand in hand with the rejection of biblical infallibility, which is necessary for their rejection of “the Bible’s testimony to the divinity of God the Son,” and “for this reason Arians, Socinians, and Unitarians have, in all ages, been in the forefront of so-called ‘higher’ and destructive Bible criticism.”¹²⁶ Moreover, Socinianism breeds easily in an environment of Arminianism, as the Reformed in the Netherlands realized when one of the most prominent Arminians involved in the Remonstrance, Simon Episcopius (1583–1643), built his own theology that denied the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit on the foundation of Arminianism.¹²⁷

Just as Arminianism made inroads into England, so did Socinianism. The conclusion Owen reached in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647)—that the Arminian belief that Christ died for all men could “hurry poor souls into the bottom of Socinian blasphemies”—led him to focus on “a new theological antagonist, with which he would grapple through the following decade and beyond.”¹²⁸

Interestingly, Owen regarded Arminianism and Socinianism “both as essentially manifestations of the same heretical tendency towards notions of

¹²³ Breward, “Socinus and Socinianism,” 649.

¹²⁴ Trueman, *John Owen*, 89.

¹²⁵ Breward, “Socinus and Socinianism,” 649.

¹²⁶ Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 186.

¹²⁷ See Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 3.

¹²⁸ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 88; John Owen, *Salus Electorum, Sanguis Jesu: Or the Death of Death in the Death of Christ. A Treatise of the Redemption and Reconciliation That Is in the Blood of Christ with the Merit Thereof, and the Satisfaction Wrought Thereby* (London: Philemon Stephens, 1648), 19–20, 165–66.

human autonomy . . . as points on a sliding scale of heresy, with the difference being one of quantity, rather than quality, of error.” This is why readers may notice that Owen tends to “blur the differences between the two.” Although the two systems are different “on several points of doctrine, Owen focuses mostly on the way soteriology is impacted by the relative autonomy each tradition grants to the human agent.”¹²⁹ Arminianism attempted to resolve the tension between omniscient divine sovereignty and the free choice of humans, while some Socinians did away with the tension as a whole by denying God’s knowledge of future contingencies or uncertainties. Owen and other Reformed theologians accused both positions of atheism because “the metaphysical freedom which both systems granted appeared to remove human beings from the need for specific divine causality,” which was “tantamount to declaring that . . . human beings are creators, gods, with reference to their own actions.”¹³⁰ To Owen, therefore, Arminianism and Socinianism represent “essentially the same moral problem: the desire to deny that human beings are subject to God’s sovereignty and to the impact of sin.”¹³¹

Socinianism’s entrenchment in Eastern Europe formed a kind of barrier to the expansion of “further Reformation eastwards, as Romanism did to the south.” So the missionaries and enthusiasts of Socinianism took their anti-Trinitarianism westward.¹³² The Netherlands, and particularly Holland, was seen somewhat as a staging ground for the invasion of Socinianism into England as “English and Dutch merchants” were reported in 1646 to be involved in “a flourishing trade in the books of Socinian authors Ostorodius, Oniedinus, Crellius, and Socinus.”¹³³ It had taken “nearly a century after the days of the Socinii” for Socinianism to make “a dramatic appearance in England in the period of confusion and enthusiasm that accompanied the Civil Wars and Cromwell’s Commonwealth”—a time when “many sects sprang up like weeds after a rainstorm.”¹³⁴

Socinianism was ushered into England by John Biddle, a school headmaster in Gloucester. Biddle was imprisoned in 1646 “on the charge of heresy,” being already known by that time as an “anti-Trinitarian agitator.”¹³⁵ While

¹²⁹ Trueman, *John Owen*, 26, 28.

¹³⁰ Trueman, *John Owen*, 28–29.

¹³¹ Trueman, *John Owen*, 61–62. Owen also conflated the two groups for polemic effect (62).

¹³² Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 154–55.

¹³³ Lee Gatiss, “Socinianism and John Owen,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 20, no. 4 (2016): 47.

¹³⁴ Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 154–55.

¹³⁵ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 137–40. Biddle was released from prison briefly in 1647, but the publication of *Twelve Arguments Drawn out of Scripture* (1647)

in prison, he published *Twelve Arguments Drawn out of Scripture* (1647), which “directly challenged the rationality of holding Jesus Christ to be divine” and distilled for the English public the essence of Socinian anti-Trinitarian thought. Socinianism was a vague “system of denial rather than a compact philosophy in its own right,” and this vagueness accounts for the success with which it spread as it opposed the Reformed faith and denied the Trinity, the divine nature of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and the atoning satisfaction made by Christ on the cross.¹³⁶

During the 1650s, Socinianism's influence was perceived to be increasing at an alarming rate, largely thanks to the publications of Biddle.¹³⁷ When the Racovian Catechism was republished in London in 1652, Owen and his colleagues pursued the people who were behind its printing and helped form a committee that published a list of “Trinitarian and evangelical” fundamentals that excluded Roman Catholics and Socinians. When Biddle's view came to Parliament's attention in 1654, “it ordered all copies of his book to be burnt by the public hangman and commissioned John Owen, a leading Puritan theologian, to write a considered response to his work.” Other writers during this time such as Matthew Poole and Edmund Porter also responded to the “moral panic about Socinianism” by writing against it, but the definitive refutation of the system fell to Owen.¹³⁸

This work, published the next year as *Vindiciae evangelicae; Or, The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated* (1655), refuted John Biddle's catechisms, the Racovian Catechism, and ideas of leading European Socinians.¹³⁹ Since Socinianism was “a rejection of the moral categories of orthodoxy in terms of divine retributive justice and vicarious sacrifice,” Owen used *Vindiciae* to rule out various “misconstructions of Christ's punishment.”¹⁴⁰

landed him back in prison, where he languished and died in 1662. Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 156.

¹³⁶ Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 157.

¹³⁷ Tweeddale, “John Owen's Commentary on Hebrews in Context,” 61.

¹³⁸ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 145. Lee Gatiss disagrees with Sarah Mortimer's argument that Owen's refutation of Socinianism was motivated primarily by political goals he had in the 1650s because “the widespread opposition to Socinianism all across the continent from every corner of Trinitarian Christendom is sufficient to show that he would have been justified in opposing it for purely theological reasons.” Gatiss, “Socinianism and John Owen,” 47–48. Cf. Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 196–97, 205, 220.

¹³⁹ Spence, “Significance of John Owen for Modern Christology,” 178; Trueman, *John Owen*, 4. “Oxford faced two principal threats in and after 1655—royalists and Socinians.” Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 163.

¹⁴⁰ Trueman, *John Owen*, 89.

Some of Owen's most characteristic insights were forged in the cauldron of anti-Socinian polemics. For instance, Owen responded to a major Socinian critique against Christ's divinity that was based on a literalistic reading of the gospels. If Christ were divine, Socinians reasoned, he would not have needed the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Owen, however, insightfully "incorporated this recognition of the Spirit's work in the life of Jesus within his overview of the Spirit's wider ministry in the life of the Church," arguing that "in restoring the image of God to the Church, the Spirit had first to renew it in the human nature of Christ. As its head he is himself part of that Church."¹⁴¹ Owen explained that

God, in the human nature of Christ, did perfectly renew that blessed image of his in our nature which we lost in Adam, with an addition of many glorious endowments which Adam was not made partaker of. . . . God designed and gave unto Christ grace and glory; and he did it that he might be the prototype of what he designed unto us, and would bestow upon us.¹⁴²

The Spirit's work in the physical body of Christ corresponds, therefore, to his work in the mystical body of Christ—"what he does in the one is the foundation of what he does in the other":¹⁴³ "he who prepared, sanctified, and glorified the human nature, the natural body of Jesus Christ, the head of the church, hath undertaken to prepare, sanctify, and glorify his mystical body, or all the elect given unto him of the Father."¹⁴⁴

One of Owen's works with which modern readers may be more familiar is *Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* (1657). What is not widely known, however, is just how novel Owen's "insistence that Christians could have communion with the individual persons of the Trinity" was.¹⁴⁵ Owen's move "to radically distinguish the operations of the divine persons"

¹⁴¹ Spence, "Significance of John Owen for Modern Christology," 179–80.

¹⁴² John Owen, Χριστολογία: *Or, A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ, God and Man. With the Infinite Wisdom, Love and Power of God in the Contrivance and Constitution Thereof* (London: Nathaniel Ponder, 1679), 213–15.

¹⁴³ Spence, "Significance of John Owen for Modern Christology," 180–81.

¹⁴⁴ John Owen, Πνευματολογία, *or, A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit. Wherein an Account Is Given of His Name, Nature, Personality, Dispensation, Operations, and Effects. His Whole Work in the Old and New Creation is Explained; the Doctrine concerning It Vindicated from Oppositions and Reproaches. The Nature Also and Necessity of Gospel-Holiness; the Difference between Grace and Morality, or a Spiritual Life unto God in Evangelical Obedience and a Course of Moral Virtues, Are Stated and Declared* (London: Nathaniel Ponder, 1674), 155.

¹⁴⁵ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 171.

in *Communion with God* “was made in the context of the Socinian advance” and reflects Owen’s desire to combat Socinian influence while proffering constructive theological and practical insights.¹⁴⁶ Combatting Socinianism was also one of the main reasons Owen gave for writing his magisterial commentary on the epistle to the Hebrews.¹⁴⁷

In *The Nature of Apostasy*, Owen writes that Socinians fill the vacuum of the spiritual ignorance of people’s minds with unbounded rationalism rooted in pride, saying, “they get the advantage of the ground in general, by pretending to reduce all men unto right reason” in declaring “that there is no reason why we should believe anything that reason cannot comprehend” and “that the mind of man is, in its present condition, every way sufficient unto the whole of its duties, both intellectual and moral, with respect unto God, and to answer whatever is required of us.”¹⁴⁸ Socinians promise much but deliver little. “In that emancipation of reason from under the bond of superstition and tradition, in that liberty of rational inquiry into the true nature and causes of all things, in that refusal to captivate their understandings in religion to the bare authority of men no wiser than themselves,” they flaunt an “increase of learning and converse, with a decay of the true fear of God, the very idol of this age” and applaud “whoever will prepare a sacrifice unto it, though it be of the most holy mysteries of the gospel.” At the same time, Socinians cast derision on those who do not join them: “whoever shall refuse to cast incense on its altar shall be sure to be exploded, as one that professes himself to be a fool, and even a common enemy unto mankind.”¹⁴⁹ Here and throughout his works Owen confronts “the rising rationalism of his times,” which was congenial to Socinian thought, by confessing that God is the ultimate authority, affirming the proper “ministerial use of rationality,” and emphasizing the limitations of human reason due to our finitude and sin.¹⁵⁰ The fact that Owen considered Socinianism to be “one of the most troublesome threats to orthodoxy” is clearly reflected throughout *The Nature of Apostasy*.¹⁵¹

Kapic observes that “by the end of the seventeenth century Socinianism and Arminianism were some of the strongest growing pre-Enlightenment

146 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 172.

147 Tweeddale, “John Owen’s Commentary on Hebrews in Context,” 61.

148 Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, “To the Reader.”

149 Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, “To the Reader.”

150 Willem van Vlastuin and Kelly M. Kapic, “Introduction, Overview, and Epilogue,” 20.

151 Kelly M. Kapic, “The Spirit as Gift: Explorations in John Owen’s Pneumatology,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (London: Routledge, 2016), 115.

religious forces.”¹⁵² The Socinianism of Owen's day “attempted to synthesize two intellectual trends, bringing together the Renaissance emphasis on rationalism with the Reformation's emphasis on freedom.”¹⁵³ Among the many strands of Socinianism, what was common was “a thoroughgoing biblicism joined with an unflinching rationalism” that aimed “to follow the scriptures wherever they led, allowing ‘unbiased’ human reason to illumine the path and remove any foreign debris that had sidetracked earlier generations of the church.”¹⁵⁴ Socinianism fostered a direct path to a moralism that downplayed the reality and need for justification by faith in Christ alone.¹⁵⁵ Thus, Owen fought a “lifelong battle against the rising tide of Socinian rationalism.”¹⁵⁶

In this battle, however, Owen did not succeed as much as he desired. The final decades of the seventeenth century saw Socinianism win “the support of a large section of the intellectual community in England” in spite of the challenges “put forward from the ranks of orthodox theologians in the prolonged debate.” Because of the beachhead Socinianism made in the intellectual community, “English Presbyterianism, the community that had drawn up the Westminster [Standards] and had hopes at one time of assuming control of the state Church,” was “almost wholly won over to Unitarianism in the decades that followed.” This undoing of much theological good ought to serve as a warning for Christians today that “without a robust Christology,” even a “theologically confident and highly influential body of Christians” like the heirs of the Westminster divines “was hardly able to survive as a recognizable body.”¹⁵⁷

152 Kapic, “Spirit as Gift,” 115. “The rise of rationalism happened within Christendom. Even in the sixteenth century some tried to make reason, rather than revelation or tradition or some other authority, to be the final arbiter of truth. Laelius (1526–1562) and the more infamous Faustus Socinus (1539–1604) were the most obvious examples. Spreading from Italy to Poland, ideas linked with Socinianism eventually arrived in England when the Racovian Catechism (1605) was translated into English and printed there in 1652.” Owen also seemed to see similarities between Socinianism and Arminianism in their shared elevation of reason above Scripture. “It is worth observing further that Owen would also view Arminianism as another manifestation of rationalism. The first sentence from his early work *A Display of Arminianism* (1642) makes this point clearly.” Kapic, “John Owen's Theological Spirituality,” 56, 58.

153 Kapic, “Spirit as Gift,” 115.

154 Kapic, “Spirit as Gift,” 116.

155 “The resulting Socinian ‘moralism’ undermined the Protestant Reformed conception of justification.” Kapic, “John Owen's Theological Spirituality,” 57.

156 Suzanne McDonald, “Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: John Owen and the ‘Reforming’ of the Beatific Vision,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (London: Routledge, 2016), 147.

157 Spence, “Significance of John Owen for Modern Christology,” 173.

PROCLAIMING THE PERSON OF CHRIST AND HIS BENEFITS TO BELIEVERS

Negatively, Owen's contention against Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Socinianism certainly was a polemical struggle against idolatry, Pelagianism, and neo-Arianism. But Owen's works also overflowed with a positive, constructive insight and passion for the person and work of Christ and the great benefits those who have been brought into union with him may enjoy throughout their earthly pilgrimage. Polemics against heresy was a necessary task, like pulling weeds, for preparing the ground for a greater display of Christ and the benefits he offers to his people.

One of the chief themes that inspired Owen's theological work was the priesthood of Christ as the once-for-all sacrifice of atonement for sinners and the benefactor of grace, including his continued, efficacious ministry for believers. The fact that Owen saw Christ's priesthood as a major doctrine confronting the major heresies of his day is evident from Owen's first—and now lost—work, titled *On the Priesthood of Christ*, against Papists, Arminians, and Socinians, the three main “polemical targets” to which Owen “directs most of his polemical fire” from the beginning to the end of his career.¹⁵⁸ The priesthood of Christ was the juncture where orthodoxy was most under attack in Owen's day by these three powerful enemies.¹⁵⁹ For Owen, the priesthood of Christ becomes a three-front battlefield because

the Catholics undermine the biblical teaching about Christ's once-for-all sacrifice through their insistence upon the Mass and upon the intermediary role of human priesthood; the Arminians undermine the efficacy of Christ's priestly work through their understanding of a universal atonement and their semi-Pelagian notion of free will which means Christ's priesthood establishes salvation only as a possibility, not as an actuality;¹⁶⁰ and the Socinians undermine Christ's priesthood by denying that Christ is very

¹⁵⁸ Trueman, *John Owen*, 17. This first, unpublished manuscript, *Tractatu de Sacerdotio Christi* (1643), embodies “principal themes” that Owen developed “through much of his later writing—including the Reformed view of the work of Christ, and opposition to Arminianism, Socinianism, and Roman Catholicism.” Gribben *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 42–43.

¹⁵⁹ Trueman, *John Owen*, 88.

¹⁶⁰ In *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647), Owen framed Arminianism as an assault on the doctrine of Christ's priesthood as it made him an “unfaithful priest, offering a sacrifice for all while interceding only for the elect.” Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 88; cf. Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, 30–32.

God of very God and thus reconfiguring the priesthood as little more than a moral paradigm for others to follow.¹⁶¹

Owen's greatest interest, then, is to proclaim the "person of Christ" and "the benefits we receive from him" and to expose and refute any system of thought that robs God's people of the faith and life centered on such a Savior. In *The Nature of Apostasy*, Owen alludes to Socinianism as the most "grievous" of all the evils he had seen in his life because of "the public contempt I have lived to see cast on the person of Christ, as to its concernment in our religion, and the benefits we receive from him."¹⁶²

Likewise, as Owen refutes Remonstrant thought and brings biblical clarity to the issue of the extent of the atonement in *A Display of Arminianism* (1642), his point of focus is "not so much predestination" as it is "the unity of blood sacrifice and heavenly intercession in the work of Christ," whose "whole life is rooted in his role as mediator: his sacrifice provides the basis for the heavenly intercession; the heavenly intercession is where the sacrifice finds its completion; and the two cannot and must not be separated."¹⁶³ Christ's intercession, Owen said, "is nothing but a continued oblation of himself."¹⁶⁴

Owen's passion for the priesthood of Christ and its benefits for his people becomes even more relevant in the context of Owen's lifelong interest in the epistle of Hebrews. Hebrews overflows with themes of Christ's supremacy as the great high priest of his people, which is the source of their strength and faith and the object of their gratitude and worship.

The Nature of Apostasy was, in fact, an expansion of Owen's commentary on Hebrews 6:4–6 and was published as an appendix to volumes of the commentary (1674, 1680, 1684).¹⁶⁵ Owen's reflection on Hebrews 6:4–6 is so important "that he publishes two versions of it: the first comes in his Hebrews commentary" and the second is found in *The Nature of Apostasy* (which accounts for the brevity of his treatment of this passage in his Hebrews commentary).¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Trueman, *John Owen*, 17.

¹⁶² Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 7.

¹⁶³ Trueman, *John Owen*, 91.

¹⁶⁴ Owen, *Display of Arminianism*, 94.

¹⁶⁵ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 253. Owen's commentary on Hebrews was "one of the most exhaustive philological, hermeneutical, exegetical, doctrinal, polemical, and pastoral treatises of seventeenth century puritanism." John W. Tweeddale, "A Sure Foundation: Christology, Covenant Theology, and Hermeneutics in John Owen's Discourses on Hebrews" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2016), 47.

¹⁶⁶ Kapic, "Spirit as Gift," 120n27. "Although the treatise on apostasy was published before the third Hebrews volume (which contains the 6:4–6 pericope), from the style of writing, etc.,

In addition to Owen's treatise on apostasy, other writings such as his discourse on the Sabbath and *Doctrine of the Saints Perseverance* grew out of his Hebrews commentary or were primarily intended to exposit Hebrews. Owen tells readers that his discourse on the Sabbath is based on and supplemental to his commentary on Hebrews 4 as "but a part of our remaining Exercitations on that Epistle."¹⁶⁷ As for his treatise on perseverance, Owen said that its primary intent was to help readers understand Hebrews 6 and only secondarily to oppose the Arminian treatment of perseverance in John Goodwin's *Redemption Redeemed* (1651): "The confutation of Mr. Goodwin was but secondarily in my eye; and the best way for that I judged to consist in a full scriptural confirmation of the truth he opposed. That I chiefly intended."¹⁶⁸ Moreover, there is a "substantial duplication of content" between Owen's *The Doctrine of Justification* and his commentary on Hebrews 7:22 owing to his simultaneous work on both projects.¹⁶⁹

In sum, Owen's interest in the priesthood of Christ—one of the most important themes in Hebrews and the subject of his earliest unpublished work, "On the Priesthood of Christ"—served as an optic through which he launched critiques on Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Socinianism.¹⁷⁰ Owen thus sustained a "a pattern of personal, pastoral, polemical, and exegetical interest in the letter to the Hebrews" throughout his ministry, pouring twenty-two years into its exposition in a commentary that he considered his life's crowning work and a task for which all his other

it seems most likely that Owen had first completed his exegetical work in the commentary before writing *Nature of Apostasy*." Knapp, "John Owen's Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6," 44n39.

¹⁶⁷ John Owen, *Exercitations concerning the Name, Original, Nature, Use, and Continuance of a Day of Sacred Rest Wherein the Original of the Sabbath from the Foundation of the World, the Morality of the Fourth Commandment with the Change of the Seventh Day Are Enquired Into* (London: Nathaniel Ponder, 1671), 6; cf. Tweeddale, "John Owen's Commentary on Hebrews in Context," 54.

¹⁶⁸ John Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saint's Perseverance Explained and Confirmed. Or, the Certain Permanency of Their 1. Acceptation with God, and 2. Sanctification from God* (Oxford: Leon. Lichfield, 1654), "A Preface to the Reader"; Knapp, "John Owen's Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6," 31.

¹⁶⁹ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 255–56; John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith through the Imputation of the Righteousness of Christ, Explained, Confirmed, and Vindicated* (London: R. Boulter, 1677), 256–63. For Owen's commentary on Hebrews 7:22, see John Owen, *A Continuation of the Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews. Viz. on the Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Chapters* (London: Nathaniel Ponder, 1680), 216–27. Cf. Edwin E. M. Tay, *The Priesthood of Christ: Atonement in the Theology of John Owen (1616–1683)* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2014), 7.

¹⁷⁰ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 235.

studies prepared him.¹⁷¹ His method of biblical interpretation, which was refined through his massive commentary on Hebrews, in turn “contributed to his life and thought,”¹⁷² such that his study of Hebrews became both the ground and goal of much of his wider work.

OWEN AND ENTHUSIASM (EARLY QUAKERISM)

As noted above, Owen was preoccupied with battling Socinian, Arminian, and Roman Catholic errors during a period that has been called High (Reformed) Orthodoxy (ca. 1640–1700), characterized by the “integration of polemics into the development of theological systems” to address threats against orthodoxy on a greater scale than had been done in the preceding years. This does not mean, however, that Owen was too busy to confront “more localized heretical groups such as the Quakers.”¹⁷³

In meeting the challenge of the Quakers, Owen confronts what he called “enthusiasm,” which exaggerated the gifts of God to “distort healthy Christian spirituality.”¹⁷⁴ Owen does not always explicitly name the competing theological systems as sources of apostasy while he exposes and refutes them. He often prefers to expose the harmful tendencies underlying these systems “that endangered genuine Christian spirituality”—“especially various forms of rationalism, blind enthusiasm, and manipulative superstition” that undergirded the thought of early Quakerism (as well as Socinianism and Roman Catholicism).¹⁷⁵

The “enthusiasts,” or Quakers (known today as the Religious Society of Friends), emerged from “the religious controversies of the 1650s in England” and “the turmoil of the English Civil War (1642–1651).”¹⁷⁶ Today there are approximately twenty thousand Quakers worldwide, over half

¹⁷¹ Tweeddale, “Sure Foundation,” 41–42, 46–47. Some might consider it an accident of history, then, that “contemporary evangelicals celebrate Owen for his investigations of spiritual experience, rather than for the achievements with which he was most satisfied, including his defenses of Trinitarianism and his commentary on Hebrews.” Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 272.

¹⁷² John W. Tweeddale, *John Owen and Hebrews: The Foundation of Biblical Interpretation*, Studies in English Theology (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 26.

¹⁷³ Trueman, *John Owen*, 7.

¹⁷⁴ Kopic, “John Owen’s Theological Spirituality,” 55.

¹⁷⁵ Kopic, “John Owen’s Theological Spirituality,” 78.

¹⁷⁶ J. A. Punshon, “Quaker Theology,” *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 553; Michael A. G. Haykin, “John Owen and the Challenge of the Quakers,” in *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, ed. Robert W. Oliver (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 135. George Fox (1624–1691) was an early Quaker leader who

of whom are evangelical, in line with the influence of Joseph John Gurney (1788–1847) and the Richmond Declaration (1887).¹⁷⁷ They are to be distinguished from their more theologically liberal cousins, the so-called “Hicksite” Quakers. The early Quakerism of Owen’s seventeenth-century context was distinguished by “its emphasis on the divine light within every human being (a conviction drawn from John 1:9), its fiery proselytizing, its contempt of university learning, and its reliance on dramatic, socially disruptive gestures.”¹⁷⁸ Early Quaker enthusiasts believed that this “universal inward Light” acted savingly on Christians and non-Christians alike, “revealed scriptural truth (Jn. 16:13), and enjoined non-violence, strict equality and a disuse of all conventional forms of honorific address.”¹⁷⁹ Quaker ministry was unpaid and not ordained; creeds, confessions, and theological formulations (such as imputed righteousness and the Trinity) were rejected; and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper were discontinued. When Quakers gathered, they worshiped in silence, “waiting for the Holy Spirit to inspire extempore prayers, sermons or testimonies.”¹⁸⁰ While affirming that God could speak to people mediately through the Scriptures, Quakers claimed to experience “the Spirit’s immediate inspiration and guidance like the Apostles and saints of the New Testament era.”¹⁸¹

The early Quakers of Owen’s day were much more aggressive and heterodox than their modern-day descendants. They disrupted church services in what they called “the steeple-houses” and held demonstrations on the campus of Oxford University while Owen was vice-chancellor there. Two Quakers, Elizabeth Fletcher (d. 1659) and Elizabeth Leavens (d. 1665), sparked riots at Oxford and were arrested, whipped, and driven out of town—punishments administered under Owen’s watch. The Quaker Samuel Fisher, a former Baptist and former Presbyterian, wrote against the infallibility of Scripture. A key work of Owen’s refuting such attacks against Scripture and claims to extrabiblical revelation by enthusiasts was *A Defense of Sacred Scripture against the Fanatics* (1658).¹⁸² Thus, Owen devotes scant amount of space to dealing with certain elements of enthusiasm in *The*

unified Quaker groups, provided leadership, and gave a “coherent ideology” to the movement (136).

¹⁷⁷ Haykin, “John Owen and the Challenge of the Quakers,” 135.

¹⁷⁸ Haykin, “John Owen and the Challenge of the Quakers,” 135.

¹⁷⁹ Punshon, “Quaker Theology,” 553.

¹⁸⁰ Punshon, “Quaker Theology,” 553.

¹⁸¹ Haykin, “John Owen and the Challenge of the Quakers,” 139.

¹⁸² Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 457–58.

Nature of Apostasy not because he thought it was less dangerous than other heresies but because he deals specifically with enthusiasm in his 1658 work against the fanatics as well as in *Πνευματολογία, or, A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit* (1674).¹⁸³

Interestingly, “Owen (perhaps surprisingly) groups Roman Catholics and Quakers together because they both allow another source of authority to have precedence over special revelation: for one it is ecclesial tradition, for the other it is the ‘inner light.’”¹⁸⁴ In writing on apostasy from gospel worship in *The Nature of Apostasy* (chap. 11), Owen makes a twofold indictment of enthusiasts, who neglect the worship Christ appointed in preference for the dictates of their “light within,” and Roman Catholics, who make additions to the worship that Christ appointed by the dictates of their church tradition. Regarding enthusiasts, Owen wrote, “conveniency and the light within are all the reason and guide which they plead for them. And for the sacraments, or baptism and the supper of the Lord, which are so great a part of the mystical worship of the church, on I know not what fond pretenses, they utterly reject them.”¹⁸⁵ Regarding Roman Catholics, Owen stated that

by rejecting its simplicity and pure institutions, substituting a superstitious, yea, idolatrous worship of their own in the room thereof . . . they have added unto it rites and institutions of their own, in great number, partly superstitious and partly idolatrous, so there is no one ordinance or institution of Christ which they have not corrupted, the most of them so far, as utterly to destroy their nature and use.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Owen’s “Four Apologetic/Defensive Dissertations/Exercises of Sacred Scripture against the Fanatics of Our Time” was originally titled in Latin as *Pro Sacris Scripturis Adversus Hujus Temporis Fanaticos Exercitationes Apologeticae Quatuor* (Oxford: T. Robinson, 1658). In the four sections of *Pro Sacris Scripturis*, Owen first accounts for how and why Scripture may be considered the word of God. Second, he gives guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture and refutes Roman Catholicism’s claim of interpretive infallibility. Third, Owen argues that Quakers, Roman Catholics, and Jews alike impugn the perfection of God’s word. He refutes the Quaker conviction that Scripture is not the final, settled rule for the life of believers and that Scripture is merely instrumental in leading one ultimately to rely on the light within. Fourth, he elucidates the concept of “inner light” in its scriptural context and refutes the nuance early Quakers had given to it. See Haykin, “John Owen and the Challenge of the Quakers,” 142–46; Kopic, “John Owen’s Theological Spirituality,” 61.

¹⁸⁴ Kopic, “John Owen’s Theological Spirituality,” 63; see John Owen, *Συνεσις Πνευματικη: Or the Causes, Waies and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word, with Assurance Therein* (London: N. Ponder, 1678).

¹⁸⁵ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 11.

¹⁸⁶ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 11.

OWEN ON THE CHURCH, PASTORAL MINISTRY, AND CHRISTIAN LIFE

Owen on the Church: Dissenting and Congregational

Between Owen's arrival at Oxford in 1628 and his first departure in 1637, the Arminian "quasi-Roman" influence of the Laudian party of the Anglican Church was a great cause for concern. Despite being ordained in that church in 1638, he remained committed to reforming, and then dissenting from, the Church of England. In the late 1650s, no doubt with thoughts of his own efforts in mind, Owen maintained that the Anglican church "doth not, and it is to be feared, will not, nor can reform itself," especially because it was not actively guarding against Socinianism and Arminianism.¹⁸⁷

Owen's dissent expressed itself in close association with both Presbyterianism and Congregationalism, which were not in the 1640s "completely separate factions outside the Church of England." However, after 1644, Owen was no longer "a convinced presbyterian," and he began distancing himself from it.¹⁸⁸

A key factor in this shift was his reading of John Cotton's *The Keys of the Kingdom*, which spurred an "impartiall examining [of] all things by the word."¹⁸⁹ The result of his study moved Owen from holding to a form of church government "where ultimate power in the church lay in the higher courts and assemblies which operated at a supra-congregational level" to a form of government "where power was restricted to the individual congregation, albeit one with a strong eldership and not an egalitarian democracy."¹⁹⁰ Owen also adduces church history to support his realignment with Congregationalism, for Christ and the apostles never instituted diocesan episcopacy. Rather, according to Owen, it came about gradually through the negligence of the laity and the ambition and lust of church leaders for power, which set the scene for the rise of "popes, patriarchs, cardinals, metropolitan and diocesan bishops, who were utterly foreign into the state and order of the

¹⁸⁷ John Owen, *An Enquiry Into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order, and Communion of Evangelical Churches. The First Part* (London: Nathaniel Ponder, 1681), 209; Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 171; Graham S. Harrison, "John Owen's Doctrine of the Church," in *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and Robert W. Oliver (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 159. See especially Owen's *A Short Defensative about Church Government, with a Countrey Essay for the Practice of Church-Government There*, which he appended to his sermon, "A Vision of Unchangeable Free Mercy," 46–83.

¹⁸⁸ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 162; Prelock, "John Owen's Theology of Pastoral Ministry," 20. Early in his career, Owen identified as a Presbyterian, believing "presbyterian government" to be "the *via media* between Congregationalism and Episcopalism" (12–13).

¹⁸⁹ Owen, *Review of The True Nature Schism*, 36.

¹⁹⁰ Trueman, *John Owen*, 3.

primitive churches," though the "original parity" that existed among elders had begun to dissipate by the third and fourth century. Owen concludes that for the first two centuries after Christ, the church was congregationally governed; he cites Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Ignatius, and Justin Martyr to support his point.¹⁹¹

Many of Owen's key remarks on congregational church government were developed within a context of defending himself from the accusation of being schismatic. Owen argues that it is not schismatic to dissent from practices that were never stipulated or intended by Christ and the apostles (like many of those instituted by the Church of England) because they have no "divine institution" or "scriptural authority."¹⁹² Likewise, Owen sees no scriptural warrant for "a national church state based on classical and provincial assemblies" that is Presbyterian in polity and contends that the church "consists of visible believers, voluntarily joining together in a congregation in a locality to practice the ordinances and institutions of Christ, preaching the word, administering the sacraments and exercising gospel discipline, all in subjection to Christ."¹⁹³ Only congregational churches, where "there are required assemblies of the whole church," can properly fulfill three of the church's important goals:

the professed subjection of the souls and consciences of believers to Christ's authority in observing his commands, the joint celebration of gospel ordinances and worship, and the exercise and preservation of Christ's discipline by maintaining the purity of the gospel, persevering love among Christians, and representing Christ's love in and through the church.

According to Owen, no other type of church structure and government could meet these goals.¹⁹⁴

Owen disassociated himself from Presbyterianism, however, not because he was anti-Presbyterian, as Westcott argues, but because he was against the inclination for episcopal systems at regional and national levels to succumb to heavy-handedness, intolerance, and time-wasting bureaucracy. For instance, "in Owen's earlier days, he had opposed the intolerant Scottish-style

¹⁹¹ Owen, *Enquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order, and Communion of Evangelical Churches*, 283–96; cf. Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 163–64, 169.

¹⁹² Owen, *Review of the True Nature of Schism*, 9–11; Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 165.

¹⁹³ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 166–67; Owen, *Review of The True Nature Schism*, 262.

¹⁹⁴ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 167; Owen, *Review of The True Nature Schism*, 268.

Presbyterianism of the day, and later would combat a restored Anglican Episcopacy which sought to criminalise all who failed to attend the parish church." Westcott surmises that Owen would have supported a Presbyterian system that allowed "dissent for those who honestly could not agree with its polity." On a local church level, "Owen's mature polity is Presbyterian," but on the issue of "broader courts (local presbytery, national presbytery or national assembly)," Owen's polity deems it unnecessary to "assemble them at regular and fixed intervals" or to "fill up precious time with unnecessary formalities and courtesies" and claims that they should simply assemble "as and when necessary, when discipline or doctrinal questions arise that cannot be dealt with at the local church level."¹⁹⁵

Owen on the Importance of the Pastorate and the Danger of Ministerial Negligence

Owen opens his chapter on apostasy from gospel holiness in *The Nature of Apostasy* (chap. 9) with an inquiry "into the means and causes" of "all those filthy and noxious lusts which at this day have overwhelmed the Christian world."¹⁹⁶ The internal causes of this apostasy, Owen says, which "in general respect equally all times, occasions, and sins," are not what he means to investigate here. Apostasy from gospel holiness is an inherent potentiality in all people due to the "depravation of nature, the power and deceitfulness of sin, love of the world, the profits, honors, and pleasures of it, the rage of the flesh after the satisfaction of its sensual lusts, with the aversion of the minds of men from things spiritual and heavenly" so that they are "alienated from the life of God" through the darkness and "ignorance that is in them."¹⁹⁷ These are universal elements of the human fallen condition, being part and parcel of our sinful nature "and the like depraved affections being excited and acted by the crafty influences of Satan, and inflamed with temptations" that "incline, induce, and carry men into all manner of wickedness with delight and greediness (James 1:14–15)."¹⁹⁸

Instead of investigating these internal causes, Owen's intent in chapter 9 is to trace some external causes or correlating aggravations of apostasy from

¹⁹⁵ In view of Owen's unique church polity views, Westcott ultimately categorizes Owen's denominational affiliation neither as Congregational nor Presbyterian but as "Owenian." Westcott, *By the Bible Alone!*, 525, 533. On Owen's remaining connections to Presbyterianism even after his shift into Congregationalism, see Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 81–82; Prelock, "John Owen's Theology of Pastoral Ministry," 19.

¹⁹⁶ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 9.

¹⁹⁷ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 9.

¹⁹⁸ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 9.

the holiness of the gospel. Doing so brings him to discuss a subject he deems of vital importance: how the faithfulness or failure of the pastoral ministry helps or harms the gospel holiness of the people under their care.

It was Owen's conviction that pastors must not divide their time between preaching and other lawful employments. Rather, they must be men devoted to God's work. They must be men of private prayer and they must become aware of erroneous views and defend the gospel against them.¹⁹⁹ "The well-being of the church," Owen says, "depends on the right discharge of the office of the ministry."²⁰⁰ By "ministry" Owen means "the public teachers, guides, or leaders of the people in the matter of religion . . . of all sorts, however called, styled, or distinguished, into what forms or orders soever they are cast by themselves or others"—that is, no matter what system of church government.²⁰¹

Because of the "heavy responsibility" Owen assigns to the office of pastor, he partly blames religious leaders for the degeneracy of English culture, charging them with failure in their duty to "stem the current of overflowing impiety and profaneness."²⁰² One of the most important means pastors have for restraining epidemics of backsliding in their congregations is the diligent administration of church discipline, which is essential to the health of the body of Christ.²⁰³ Church discipline is one of the four remedies Owen prescribes in chapter 9 for stemming apostasy from gospel holiness.²⁰⁴ If pastors neglect church discipline, "it is morally impossible but that the generality of the people will gradually degenerate into ignorance, profaneness, immorality, and unholiness of every kind."²⁰⁵ Overall, Reformed theology in the mid-seventeenth century was "preoccupied with the nature of pastoral ministry,"²⁰⁶ and Owen, who "had a very high view of the pastoral calling," was no exception.²⁰⁷

199 Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 12.

200 Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 9.

201 Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 9.

202 Ferguson, "Doctrine of the Christian Life," 414. Sensuality of life and profaneness is a defection from holiness that usually rises first among "the leaders of God's people, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament as well as in the history of the Church Catholic." Ferguson, "Doctrine of the Christian Life," 421; cf. Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, "To the Reader."

203 Owen writes on church discipline in the following: *Brief Instruction in the Worship of God*, 190–210; *True Nature of a Gospel Church*, 208–9, 222–33; *A Discourse concerning the Administration of Church Censures*, in *The Works of John Owen, D. D.*, ed. Thomas Russell (London: Richard Baynes, 1826), 21:499–518. Cf. Ferguson, "Doctrine of the Christian Life," 322–25.

204 See the summary of *Nature of Apostasy* below.

205 Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 9.

206 Prelock, "John Owen's Theology of Pastoral Ministry," 52.

207 Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 177–78.

Owen on the Christian Life: Faith, Backsliding, and Assurance

As we move to a treatment of Owen's understanding of faith and assurance, we must first note a novel interpretation of the Calvinistic tradition on these matters. R. T. Kendall has argued that Calvin held a different doctrine of assurance of faith than did the post-Reformation theologians and Puritans (i.e., the "Calvinists"). For Calvin, assurance was part of faith and rested on one's belief in the promises of God, but post-Reformation theologians separated faith and assurance into two categories, removed assurance from being a part of faith, and made the basis of assurance one's subjective discernment of inner, spiritual graces. Kendall maintained that Theodore Beza and William Perkins "packed and pushed the post-Reformation doctrine of assurance down the slope of experiential subjectivity" so that by the time of the Westminster Assembly, a distinction between faith and assurance was accepted, and therefore "the Westminster theology of the 1640s qualitatively departed from authentic Calvinism in the doctrine of assurance of faith."²⁰⁸

Kendall, however, failed to understand that the Puritans taught that assurance organically belongs to the essence of faith. Though it is true that the Puritans emphasized subjective grounds of assurance more than Calvin did, both taught "that assurance ultimately rests in the objective promises of God . . . to the believer who receives them by Spirit-worked faith."²⁰⁹ Kendall also downplayed the fact that "the seeds for this developing emphasis on experimental assurance lay in Calvin and the magisterial Reformers themselves."²¹⁰ Calvin was remarkably close to his successors "on the interrelationship of faith and assurance . . . despite the fact that their respective historical situations demanded quantitative distinctions of emphasis."²¹¹ Moreover, Kendall and other scholars have tended to ignore how the different historical contexts of the first generation of Reformers and post-Reformation theologians prompted different emphases in the presentation of the doctrine of faith and assurance.²¹² Thus, the differences Kendall noticed between Calvin and post-Reformed theologians were "largely matters of degree rather than of substance."²¹³

²⁰⁸ Beeke, "Faith and Assurance," 40; cf. R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

²⁰⁹ Beeke, "Faith and Assurance," 49–50.

²¹⁰ Cf. Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: P. Lang, 1991), 19–104.

²¹¹ Beeke, "Faith and Assurance," 51.

²¹² Beeke, "Faith and Assurance," 49–50.

²¹³ Beeke, "Faith and Assurance," 65–66.

To appreciate the nuances of the doctrine of faith and assurance in Calvin and his successors, one must therefore understand the nature of the different historical contexts in which they ministered. The zeal that marked the first generation of Reformed Christians waned in later generations into “a dangerous attitude . . . that fostered dead orthodoxy” where some considered “mere assent to Scripture truth without a trusting response from the heart” as sufficient for salvation. Therefore, “it became pastorally essential” for later Protestants like the Puritans “to vividly define for both godly comfort and earnest admonition the difference between common and saving grace, common and saving convictions, [and] historical and saving faith.”²¹⁴ In this post-Reformation pastoral context, “entire treatises on assurance” were developed with “the pastoral overtones of compassion for the weak in faith” and “the pressing admonitions and invitations to grow in faith” in order “to spur the living church forward to make her calling and election sure by looking beyond herself to find everything necessary for time and eternity in the Spirit-applied grace of God in Jesus Christ.”²¹⁵ Such emphases are not out of step with Calvin, who “acknowledges that assuring faith is neither retained without severe struggle against unbelief, nor left untinged by doubt and anxiety.”²¹⁶ Both Calvin and his Reformed successors are agreed that “assurance is organically united to faith’s essence, but it may be possessed without the believer’s being conscious of his possession.”²¹⁷ Modern scholars who pit Calvin against later Calvinists as promoters of “morbid introspection” have “missed the mark.”²¹⁸

Both Calvin and later Reformed theologians therefore present the same means of assurance but with different emphases. In Owen’s context, for instance, “the divines of the Westminster Assembly” enjoin believers to pursue “all three modes of assurance”—namely, faith in God’s promises, evidences of grace, and the Spirit’s witness—in order to “obtain as full a measure of assurance as possible by the grace of God.”²¹⁹

²¹⁴ Beeke, “Faith and Assurance,” 50.

²¹⁵ Beeke, “Faith and Assurance,” 66. See also Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, “William Perkins and His Greatest Case of Conscience,” in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2012), 587–99; Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Theology: Historical, Experiential, and Practical Studies for the Whole of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2020), 374–61.

²¹⁶ Beeke, “Faith and Assurance,” 50.

²¹⁷ Beeke, “Faith and Assurance,” 51.

²¹⁸ Beeke, “Faith and Assurance,” 66.

²¹⁹ Beeke, “Faith and Assurance,” 66. “If any of these means are unduly emphasized at the expense of the others, the whole teaching of assurance becomes imbalanced or even dangerous” (66). Cf. Westminster Confession of Faith, 18.2.

Owen's doctrine of assurance "represents the mature reflection of the reformed tradition." In his *Exposition of Psalm 130* (1668), and consistent with Calvin's teaching, Owen teaches that assurance is a fruit of faith and part of normal Christian experience, though "there may be a saving relationship [with Christ] without assurance of it."²²⁰ Like other Puritans, Owen warns that "false assurance is ever a possibility" while agreeing that Christians by ordinary means can obtain true assurance of faith—means that are centered on Scripture's promises of salvation, which are the infallible source of assurance. Although the subjective element is necessary, as "assurance of faith arises as a result of faith reflecting upon itself," faith "never points to itself but to the testimony upon which it is founded." Christian experience may be the test of assurance but never its foundation. Only "the promises of God which find their 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor. 1:20) may ground assurance of faith.²²¹

Thus, in *The Nature of Apostasy* Owen warns against those who have false confidence in the security of their profession and both comforts and exhorts believers whose view of their own state and faith is shaken due to sin, sloth, and negligence. Though Owen does not often use the phrase "assurance of faith," the issues he deals with grow precisely out of the dangers and struggles associated with assurance.²²² In chapter 12, Owen warns professing Christians against an overconfident presumption that they cannot fall, representing the Puritan pastoral emphasis on the subjective, participatory elements of assurance of faith as he presses home our responsibility to labor for zealous Chris-

²²⁰ Ferguson, "Doctrine of the Christian Life," 197–98, 220; John Owen, *A Practical Exposition on the CXXXth Psalm. Wherein the Nature of the Forgiveness of Sin, the Truth and Reality of It Asserted; and the Case of a Soul Distressed with the Guilt of Sin, and Relieved by a Discovery of Forgiveness with God, Is at Large Discoursed* (London: Nathaniel Ponder, 1680), 108–9; cf. Westminster Confession of Faith, 18.4.

²²¹ Ferguson, "Doctrine of the Christian Life," 198–99, 204.

²²² Owen also uses the word "assurance" for what seems to have the sense of "certainty." In chapter 5, as Owen develops his discussion about darkness and ignorance (the second cause of apostasy), he touches on the importance of mental certainty of the truth of the gospel; he calls this "assurance" of the truth, which comes by spiritual illumination. Spiritual illumination is the only essential and sufficient source of "assurance in their minds of the truth of the things which they do believe," and it is this assurance of the truth, qualitatively superior to anything produced by sense or reason, that equips professing Christians with steadfastness against apostasy (chap. 4). This "assurance" (or certainty) works itself out in felt Christian experience, flowing from "the renovation of our minds, and the transforming of our souls into the image of the glory of God in Christ." We must not, therefore, "rest in any apprehensions of truth whose efficacy we have no experience of in our hearts, nor think that we know any more of the mysteries of the gospel" but strive for the kind of illumination and assurance that "may secure our profession against temptations and oppositions" (chap. 5).

tian diligence in using the means of grace and watching out for temptation. Because apostasy from holiness, truth, and worship spreads like a contagion, both in Owen's time and in ours, now is the worst time to be complacent in our profession. Owen proclaims,

Are we sure that this epidemical infection shall not enter our habitations? Do we not find how it has one way or other attempted us already? Can we find no decay in zeal or love among ourselves, no adherence unto the world unsuited unto our present state and condition in it; no neglect of duties, no rareness in divine visitations, no want of life and delight in spiritual communion with Christ, no hurtful growth of carnal wisdom, with all its attendants? Or have we not found ourselves one way or other sensibly attacked by these evils? It is to be feared that those who can make no observation of anything of this nature among themselves, are somewhat sick of the Laodicean distemper. And if we will not be awakened and stirred up to a more than ordinary diligence, care, and watchfulness at such a season as this is, it is to be feared that ere long the generality of professors will come to be in the condition of the church of Sardis, "to have a name to live," but indeed and in the sight of Christ "to be dead." . . . It is not an easy task to stop a course in backsliding when once it is entered into. And I shall close this warning with naming two directions unto this purpose. (1) Take heed of a course in any sin. Though every sin does not immediately tend unto final apostasy, yet a course in any sin continued, does so. (2) Take heed of touching on such especial sins as have a peculiar tendency thereunto; and of what nature they are, has been declared.²²³

At the same time, however, Owen is pastorally aware that some genuine believers may be so crushed by their own backslidden state in view of the warnings in Hebrews 6:4–6 that they mistakenly label themselves full and final apostates. These believers fear they have fully forsaken God, supposing

themselves so far interested in the backsliding and apostasy described, as that the threatening denounced in the text does belong unto them also; and that they are now judicially shut up under impenitency. For, they say that they had attained unto a greater measure or degree of holiness, unto more readiness, evenness, and constancy in the duties of obedience, than

²²³ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 12.

they do now retain. They have fearfully and woefully fallen off from a better frame, into deadness, barrenness, neglect of duties, and it may be in some instance into a sinful course, and that for many days.²²⁴

Owen begins answering this state of mind by twisting the dagger a bit, as it were. He claims that yes, professing Christians should be worried in such a case, writing that it is “unquestionably the duty of every one who is sensible of any evil of this nature, in the frame of his heart or course of his life, to give himself no rest therein, seeing the eternal welfare of his soul is highly in question.” Owen describes the extreme danger of this condition in terms of its unresponsiveness to assurance and sense of alienation from its ground, the objective promises of God: “for there is no word of truth, no promise of God, to assure any of his love and favor while they are in such a state.”²²⁵

However, says Owen, “it may be given as a safe rule in general, that he who is spiritually sensible of the evil of his backsliding, is unquestionably in a recoverable condition; and some may be so who are not yet sensible thereof, so long as they are capable of being made so by convictions.” In other words, the very fact that a believer is concerned about his or her backslidden state is a strong indicator that all is not lost—as long as this backslidden state has not “proceeded out of dislike unto Christ and the gospel.” Then, the believer may yet be recovered “upon the diligent use of all means of a blessed recovery.”²²⁶

Likewise, some Christians may fear that they are lost because, after much struggle with a besetting sin, they have concluded that their “corruptions (they say, this or that it may be in particular) are too strong for their convictions; and after they thought themselves above them, they have again been prevailed on and overcome,” and thus some habitual sin in their lives makes them suspect that they have completely forsaken God. These persons face “no small hazard and danger.” Owen first refers such believers to his work on the mortification of sin. Then he counsels such Christians to do the following:

1. “Acquaint some able spiritual guide with their state and condition.”
2. Violently oppose “all occasions of . . . the particular corruption supposedly prevalent” by rejecting the mind’s “first solicitations” of the sin, or reject as folly the false “reserves” or promises “that although a

²²⁴ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 12.

²²⁵ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 12.

²²⁶ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 12.

man proceed so far, or so far in the gratification of his present inclinations, yet he will put a stop unto or avoid what they may lead unto.”

3. Avoid the location or place the sin is prevalent.
4. Be constant in private prayer against the sin.²²⁷

Therefore, in his teaching on faith and assurance, Owen strongly presses on both the presumptuously overconfident believer and the sullenly dejected backslider their duty “to perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord” (2 Cor. 7:1).²²⁸ And yet, throughout the treatise, “Owen is adamant that a truly regenerate believer will never fall into apostasy.”²²⁹

SUMMARY OF THE WORK

All of this theological and historical background provides us with the tools we need to summarize Owen's *Nature of Apostasy* with understanding and profit. Overall, the book may be divided into five parts. In the first part, Owen defines total apostasy in the context of a detailed exposition of Hebrews 6:4–6 (chap. 1) and describes partial apostasy in the context of a review of church history that culminates with criticism of the Roman Catholic Church (chap. 2). The second section describes several causes and general elements of apostasy from the “truth,” or doctrine, of the gospel (chaps. 3–7). In the third part (chaps. 8–10), Owen discusses apostasy from the holiness of life that the gospel enjoins upon professing believers. The fourth section treats the issue of apostasy from the worship practices stipulated by the gospel (chap. 11). In the fifth and final section, Owen summarizes final cautions about the dangers of apostasy (chap. 12) and instructs readers how to avoid falling into it (chap. 13).

Understanding Total and Partial Apostasy (Chaps. 1–2)

In the first section (chaps. 1–2), Owen introduces his exposition of Hebrews 6:4–6 by pointing out some ways in which the passage's message on total apostasy had been mishandled in church history. From the very outset, Owen's pastoral skill in handling a difficult topic becomes apparent as he indicts earlier generations for misapplying Hebrews 6.

One instance of misapplication Owen mentions is the controversy over the *lapsi* (i.e., “the lapsed”) after the Decian persecution. When the Roman

²²⁷ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 12.

²²⁸ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 8.

²²⁹ Johnson, “Theology of Sin in the Writings of John Owen,” 116.

Emperor Decius (ca. 201–251) made an edict requiring all people in the empire to sacrifice to the gods or face torture and execution, some Christians refused to compromise their faith and became victims of severe persecution ending in martyrdom. Other Christians offered the required sacrifice or obtained a certificate testifying they did so. After the persecution, there was a controversy over how to handle these Christians who fell away during persecution, called the *lapsi*. The controversy caused a schism in the church at Carthage over whether or not to readmit the *lapsi* into the church.

Some, like Novatus of Carthage, held that all *lapsi* should be welcomed back in the church without penance. Others, like Novatian of Rome (ca. 200–258), refused to receive back any of the *lapsi* into the church. Cyprian (ca. 200–258), a bishop of the church in Carthage during the time of the Decian persecution, held a mediating position that allowed the return of lapsed Christians into the church only after public penance and allowed (or “permitted”) Christians who had actually offered pagan sacrifices to take communion only at the time of their death.²³⁰ A Roman synod eventually condemned Novatian and his followers as schismatics and heretics in 251.²³¹

Thus, the issue of whether true believers may ultimately fall away from their faith to eternal damnation was certainly not new. In Owen's day this old concern was debated in new forms, such as in the controversy against Arminian theologians over the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of saints, which taught that true believers are preserved by God to the end even as they have a duty to use the means of grace to persevere to the end.²³² These debates grew out of the concern expressed by some Arminian theologians, such as John Goodwin, that the doctrine of the saints' perseverance might diminish believers' urgency in pursuing a godly life, and that what was needed to stimulate godliness was “a possibility even of a final defection from faith.”²³³

²³⁰ See G. L. Bray, “Cyprian,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 184; V. Saxer, “Cyprian of Carthage,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 1:646–49.

²³¹ H. J. Vogt, “Novatian,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 2:933–35; “Novatian,” *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, ed., E. John McClintock and James Strong (New York: Harper, 1894), 7:211–13.

²³² See Westminster Confession of Faith, 17; the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Obedience (1658), 17; and the Canons of Dort (1618), 5. See also Beeke and Jones, “The Puritans on the Perseverance of the Saints,” in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2012), 601–17.

²³³ John Goodwin, *Apolytrosis Apolytroseos, or Redemption Redeemed* (London, 1651), 364; cf. Henry Knapp, “John Owen's Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6,” 30.

Owen responds to the Arminian position in his commentary on Hebrews 6:4–6 and in treatises such as *The Doctrine of the Saints Perseverance* and *The Nature of Apostasy* to deal with the “sundry mistakes” that were being made “in the practical application of the intention of” the passage “unto the consciences of men.”²³⁴ The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints “controls the whole of” Owen’s exegesis, so the apostates in Hebrews 6:4–6 could never have been true believers, and thus “whatever the significance the description in vv. 4–6 may have” for Owen, “it is not a *saving* significance.”²³⁵ Owen’s general position on the spiritual character or identity of the apostates was identical to that of “other Reformed/Calvinist interpreters,” but Owen differs from other Puritan exegetes on some details regarding the benefits the apostates enjoyed: Owen read “the heavenly gift” as referring to the Holy Spirit,²³⁶ “the world to come” as referring to the inaugurated new age or “world” of the apostle’s own day, and “tasted” as referring to an actual experience by the apostates of “powers, gifts of tongues, and other miraculous operations.”²³⁷

Owen’s careful exposition of Hebrews 6:4–6 highlights several key points: that not all of the gifts and operations of the Holy Spirit are saving (though it is a great privilege to be “enlightened,” to be “made partakers of the Holy Ghost,” and to “taste of the heavenly gift,” “the good word of God,” and “the powers of the world to come”); that these privileged operations of the Spirit may be experienced in some measure by people who yet never receive the heart-changing power of the gospel in their lives; and that a rejection of the gospel after some experience of these gifts and privileges is a great aggravation

²³⁴ For Owen’s exposition on Hebrews 6:4–6, see Owen, *Continuation of the Exposition . . . on the Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Chapters*, 38–52. For Owen’s treatise-length response to Goodwin, see Owen, *Doctrine of the Saints Perseverance* (London: 1654).

²³⁵ Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 233; cf. Knapp, “John Owen’s Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6,” 39.

²³⁶ Owen, *Continuation of the Exposition . . . on the Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Chapters*, 43–44. Owen’s view on “gift” contrasts with the view that it means Christ (which was held by John Trapp and John Gill), the “justifying grace/faith” in David Dickson’s view, and the nonjustifying, temporary kind of faith in William Gouge’s view. John Trapp, *A Commentary or Exposition upon All the Epistles, and the Revelation of John the Divine* (London, 1647), 674; *Annotations upon All the Books of the Old and New Testaments* (London, 1645), commentary on Heb. 6:4; John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament* (London, 1747), 706; David Dickson, *A Short Explanation of the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews* (Cambridge, 1649), sig. F12r; *The Dutch Annotations upon the Whole Bible*, trans. Theodore Haak (London, 1657), commentary on Heb. 6:4–6; William Gouge, *Commentary on Hebrews* (London, 1655; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1980), 397. Cf. Knapp, “John Owen’s Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6,” 49.

²³⁷ Owen, *Continuation of the Exposition . . . on the Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Chapters*, 47; cf. Knapp, “John Owen’s Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6,” 49.

of sin. Accordingly, Owen affirms that “the least grace is a better security for heaven than the greatest gifts or privileges whatever.”²³⁸

Although Owen eschews an overly rigid application of the passage to backslidden Christians who are genuinely seeking God in repentance, he is still convinced that many individuals and the majority of the church in his day are guilty of *partial* apostasy. Owen defines partial apostasy as a forsaking of “any important principle of evangelical truth,” a habitual neglect of obedience to Christ, and a condition in which individuals and churches grow self-satisfied and complacent because of their “outward order and administration” so that “the glory, power, and purity of Christian religion are lost in the world.”²³⁹ In Owen’s preface to the reader, he aptly observes that “religion is the same that ever it was, only it suffers by them that make profession of it. Whatever disadvantage it falls under in the world, they must at length answer for in whose misbelief and practice it is corrupted.”²⁴⁰ On this remark, W. H. Davies insightfully elucidates the idea of *partial* apostasy: “Note that Owen says *misbelief*, not *unbelief*; not refusing to believe, but believing wrongly. . . . [W]hile the latter is apostasy *from* the truth, the former is apostasy *in* the truth, since it does not involve a complete departure from all the fundamentals of the gospel.”²⁴¹ Owen charges Christendom in general and Roman Catholicism in particular with this partial defection from the faith and refutes the claim of the Roman Catholic Church of indefectibility (chap. 2).

Apostasy from the Doctrine of the Gospel (Chaps. 3–7)

The second section (chaps. 3–7) therefore describes several causes of apostasy from the “mystery,” “truth,” or doctrine of the gospel (chaps. 3–6), discloses the work of Satan in doctrinal apostasy, warns of God’s judgments in such cases (chap. 6), and discusses a particular instance of doctrinal apostasy that rejects the person, work, and grace of Jesus Christ (chap. 7).

In chapter 3, Owen opens with an affirmation that a profession of the gospel involves doctrine, obedience, and steadfastness under trial. He then traces how the apostasy of the churches was predicted in apostolic times and gives examples of the manifestation of doctrinal apostasy in the times of the apostles and early church, the church fathers, and among the Reformed churches in his own day. Owen then turns in chapter 4 to an

²³⁸ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 1.

²³⁹ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 2.

²⁴⁰ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, “To the Reader.”

²⁴¹ Davies, “Puritan Doctrine of Apostasy,” 68.

explanation of the first cause of doctrinal apostasy: the innate enmity of the fallen human mind to gospel truths, which leads to love of sin, spiritual decay, a wicked life, and finally, the historic apostasy of the Church of Rome. With an inborn enmity toward truth, "men's corruptions will prevail against their convictions. First they will stifle the truth as to its operations, and then reject it as to its profession."²⁴² Only constant renewal of heart by the power of the gospel can preserve people in their profession of the Christian faith. The primary God-ordained means of stemming our natural revolt from the truth is diligent ministerial instruction in the word of God (chap. 4).

The second cause of doctrinal apostasy (chap. 5) is spiritual darkness and ignorance of gospel truth. The spiritual darkness of human minds hinders understanding of the gospel and consistency of practice in the Christian life; here, too, what is needed is spiritual illumination by the gospel's truth and power. No matter how learned a person who once professed the gospel may seem, "no man who forsakes the truth ever saw the glory of it, or had experience of its power."²⁴³ Owen goes on to exhort his readers to obtain a Spirit-empowered understanding of gospel truths. Darkness and ignorance of gospel truths, concurrent with outward, formal religion (e.g., Roman Catholicism), are causes of doctrinal apostasy and again underscore the importance of ministerial diligence in teaching gospel truth.

In chapter 6, Owen presents three more causes of doctrinal apostasy: pride and vanity of mind, sloth and negligence, and love of the world. On pride and vanity of mind, Owen exposes the limits of human reason and the dangers of unbounded rationalism. Owen considers intellectual arrogance and rational autonomy the root of all heresies (such as the Socinianism of his day), which he argues is a road that ultimately leads whole communities into atheism. Owen then shows how complacent security and overconfidence in spiritual matters lead to sloth and negligence in maintaining a profession of gospel truths. Love of the world causes doctrinal apostasy, especially when those who are under the pressure of persecution are tempted to renounce Christ for the temporal comforts of the world's approval. The love of the world also works in people's hearts by superstition and error in that they defect from the gospel when "the world is enthroned" in their minds and "made their idol, while hopes of

²⁴² Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 4.

²⁴³ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 5.

advance, and fears of loss, are the principal affections whereby their course of life is steered."²⁴⁴

Owen concludes chapter 6 with an explanation of how Satan is involved in doctrinal apostasy by preventing human beings from either receiving or retaining gospel truth. Finally, Owen warns of God's severe judgments upon churches and individuals for following Satan in doctrinal apostasy, including the removing of his blessing from churches and plunging of people into further darkness and ignorance, sending them strong delusions, and striking them with blindness and hardness of heart.

Following chapters 3–6, which focus on apostasy's "general reasons and causes," chapter 7 presents theologically specific "reasons that are peculiar unto every especial instance of backsliding in any kind" involving a falling away "from the whole mystery" of the gospel "with respect unto the person and grace of Christ, the satisfaction for sin made by his death, the atonement by the blood of his sacrifice, justification by his righteousness, and sanctification by his Spirit."²⁴⁵ In view of the general causes of apostasy in chapters 3–6, many people defect from gospel truth, Owen says, "merely on the impressions of outward circumstances," because of the allure of influential persons, or because of ambition and advancement. In chapter 7, however, Owen presents an apostasy of a different sort—one that renounces the whole mystery of the gospel, including the triune work of redemption. The several elements Owen describes that lead to or accompany this sort of apostasy are not to be labeled as features of "popery" or "Socinianism" only but are specific renunciations of the gospel of grace that are instantiated in many manifestations of apostasy: indifference to the necessity and benefits of Christ and his mediation, a loss of spiritual appreciation of the excellency of Christ's person and offices, a lack of the experience of the Spirit and grace of Christ for the mortification of sin (for which Owen specifically calls out the Papacy's practice of "penances, severe disciplines, and self-macerations"),²⁴⁶ ignorance of the righteousness of God, refusal to submit to the sovereignty of God (out of which has grown "Pelagianism, and of late Socinianism"²⁴⁷), and refusal to honor the Scriptures as divinely authoritative. Owen's strategy of describing general elements of apostasy seems to be designed to close off any refuge from conviction that readers may seek under a plea that these labels (e.g., "Socinian," "Papist") do

²⁴⁴ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 6.

²⁴⁵ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 7.

²⁴⁶ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 7.

²⁴⁷ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 7.

not apply to them. Since these elements of apostasy are evident in a great number of people and may underlie any number of erroneous or heretical systems, Owen reveals that the risks and realities of apostasy are far more prevalent than readers may suppose. He closes this section by reiterating the warning that such elements of doctrinal apostasy are common ways in which people “crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh” (Heb. 6:6).

Apostasy from Gospel Holiness and Obedience (Chaps. 8–10)

Owen opens the third section of this work (chaps. 8–10) by remarking that “an apostasy from the holiness of the gospel is, on many accounts more dreadful and dangerous than a partial apostasy from its truth.”²⁴⁸ Chapter 8 begins with a discussion of how Paul’s prediction of apostasy from gospel holiness (2 Tim. 3:1–5) is currently being fulfilled in the world and how this prediction should benefit the sincere and upright. Owen then provides several basic premises for understanding gospel holiness that will be useful as he addresses defections from gospel holiness later in chapters 8–10. According to these premises, the gospel is oriented toward holiness (but it is a holiness involving obedience, which proceeds from principles and motives other than the law of nature), the Spirit powerfully works with the teaching of the word to convict individuals of sin and to lead them into such holiness, and only the holiness that manifests itself in spiritual fruits glorifies Christ. These premises are vital to the underpinning of Owen’s response to how mere religious formalism and moralism lack the characteristics of gospel holiness. Chapter 8 presents two kinds of apostasy from gospel holiness: substitution and sensuality. First, one may substitute pretended duties and outward morality in the place of genuine evangelical holiness and obedience (the principal blame for which Owen lays at the feet of the Roman church), and second, apostasy from holiness may manifest itself in outright sensuality, immorality, and other indecencies out of which the gospel is meant to save people unto sanctification.

Chapter 8 deals only with the first of these kinds of apostasy from gospel holiness—its nature and causes. In a heart-searching section on the role of warfare against the flesh, the danger of habitual sins, and the allure of reputation in the world, Owen explains why people who pretend to perfect obedience wind up falling away from gospel holiness.

In chapters 9 and 10, Owen describes the second form of backsliding from holiness as, in his words, that “which I principally intend, as that which is

²⁴⁸ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 8.

of most universal concernment.” These chapters deal with eight causes and occasions of apostasy from gospel holiness—the first treated in chapter 9 and the remaining seven treated in chapter 10, followed by a concluding indictment. In chapter 9, Owen discusses how the influence of religious leaders and ministers—such as their corruption, profaneness, and sensuality of life—leads people into apostasy from the holiness of the gospel. After briefly describing these ministerial defects, Owen uses the bulk of the chapter to remind ministers of four key requirements for the purity and integrity of their vocation: keeping gospel doctrine pure, diligently instructing people in the whole counsel of God, representing God faithfully in their lifestyle, and administering church discipline.

Chapter 10 presents (as points two through eight) the remaining seven causes and occasions of the profaneness and sensuality of life that correlate with or lead to apostasy from gospel holiness: the false appropriation of exalted names and titles (e.g., “we are ‘the church’”) while living wicked lives, which prompts people to countenance their sin and indulge in it more freely; the public sin of prominent religious leaders; professing Christians persecuting one another; lack of watchfulness against prevailing national vices; mistakes about the beauty and glory of Christian religion; Satan taking advantage of seasons of apostasy; and professing Christians who discredit the gospel by their divisiveness and ineffectiveness. In the final, ninth point, Owen concludes the chapter by indicting those who continue in apostasy from gospel holiness by crucifying Christ afresh and putting him to open shame (Heb. 6:4–6) because they have renounced the commands of Christ and falsely represent him and the gospel to the world.

Apostasy from Gospel Worship (Chap. 11)

Chapter 11, the shortest chapter, takes up the issue of apostasy from the purity of gospel worship. Here, Owen discusses two means whereby apostasy takes place: either people fail to observe what Christ ordained or appointed for worship or they add nonordained elements into worship.

Owen offers two reasons why people neglect the worship Christ instituted. First, given that people have forsaken the faith of the gospel, it is no surprise that they forsake the ordinances of its worship. Second, people rest in the outward forms or institutions of worship instead of communing with God through them by faith.²⁴⁹ Owen then gives some brief directives for making

²⁴⁹ Owen is essentially confronting “those who claim to be Christian but deny or neglect the sacraments” and disagrees with “those who pit the spiritual against the physical: some rest only on the outward objects (water or bread and wine), while others fail to appreciate that these simple

use of and delighting in the institutions of gospel worship as ordained by God in his word.

The second means of apostatizing from the regulative principle²⁵⁰ of gospel worship transpires when churches add nonordained, man-made elements into worship. This generally occurs when people reject the spiritual simplicity of Christian worship and substitute idolatrous practices of their own making in its place. As Owen closes this short chapter, he underscores the seriousness of either neglecting the divinely ordained elements of Christian worship or adding unauthorized human elements into it. He affirms that apostatizing from the institutions of gospel worship is “to represent Antichrist unto the church, and not Christ; and thereby to put Christ unto ‘open shame.’”²⁵¹

In concluding chapters 3–11, Owen invites others to further study, reflect on, and write about the issue of apostasy from gospel doctrine, holiness, and worship, saying,

And if these brief considerations of the nature of the present apostasy that is in the world from the power of Christian religion, in all the principal concerns of it, with the causes and occasions thereof, do excite or provoke any who has more leisure and ability for this work, unto a more diligent and useful inquiry into them, it will be an ample reward unto my endeavors.²⁵²

Owen's call for further study on the nature of apostasy from the gospel should stimulate every generation of Christians to look humbly backward to church history and critically inward to their own churches and private lives to make sure they are not slowly and imperceptibly defecting from the doctrine, holiness, or worship of the gospel into misbelief or even unbelief.

Cautions for Confident Christians and Directions on Avoiding Apostasy (Chaps. 12–13)

Chapters 12 and 13 function as the main application sections of *The Nature of Apostasy*, though the preceding chapters consistently make application

'outward and sensible' objects are 'appointed by Christ, *anim. vehicular*,' that is, as 'means of leading and conveying the soul unto an intimate communion with God.'" Kopic, "John Owen's Theological Spirituality," 77.

²⁵⁰ The regulative principle states that "the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself." Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.1.

²⁵¹ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 11.

²⁵² Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 11.

of their respective topics at various points. Here Owen provides cautions to those who think they are still standing fast in the gospel when they are not, as well as directions on how to avoid apostasy.

First, chapter 12 provides “cautions unto those who yet stand, or think they stand, with respect unto that general defection from the gospel, whose causes and occasions we have thus far inquired into.”²⁵³ These cautions are all directed to the spiritually overconfident and provide a more sobering view of the perils Christians face in regard to their profession: the prevalence of apostasy and the epidemic spread of love for sin, the fact that God does not guarantee that apostasy will not swallow up all visible profession in a particular age, the innumerable means and ways apostasy is promoted, and the fact that there is an ever-present danger of an ultimate, irrecoverable apostasy. A final caution consists of a sobering consideration of the heinousness of total apostasy in its various aspects—how it involves counterfeit means to salvation and contempt of the gospel, Christ, the Spirit, and those who remain faithful in their profession. The chapter closes with a pastoral dialogue with those who either (1) think that they have forsaken God and have been abandoned by him or (2) are constantly thwarted in their pursuit of holiness because of their habitual, particular sins. Here, in a pastorally warm section, Owen takes up nearly a third of the chapter to help discouraged Christians use the means of grace to improve their steadfastness in and profession of the gospel.

Chapter 13 finally presents Owen's directions for escaping the power of a prevalent apostasy. Five main directives frame the chapter: laboring for a sense of God's glory and our duty in the matter of apostasy, keeping watch over our hearts to guard against dangers and neglect of duty, refusing to merely rest in the outward privileges of the church, being aware of the infection of national vices, and avoiding the errors of Christians who alienate others from the gospel. These five sections, with their subheadings, are a comprehensive set of applications that help Christians avoid apostasy in general as well as apostasy in the three specific areas discussed in the treatise: gospel doctrine, holiness, and worship.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR TODAY

Owen's treatise on *The Nature of Apostasy* is “exceedingly relevant, and we shall do well to ponder it and take it to heart.”²⁵⁴ In our day, when the news of

²⁵³ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 12.

²⁵⁴ Davies, “Puritan Doctrine of Apostasy,” 75.

religious leaders or evangelical personalities defecting from the faith is widely reported, we must see that now is a critical time for Christians everywhere to engage in a careful and prayerful study of apostasy in its nature and causes in order to fight its influence upon our doctrine, our progress in holiness, and our worship practices. As Owen makes clear in this treatise with his idea of a partial apostasy and the three areas of apostasy (doctrine, holiness, and worship), far more of us may be in danger of falling into apostasy than we may realize. Let us observe several ways in which the unique features of *The Nature of Apostasy* apply to Christians in our current ecclesiastical climate.

Owen's Pastoral Concerns

The definition and exposition of apostasy in any such treatise might be too lenient, on the one hand, or excessively rigid, on the other. What is remarkable about Owen's work is that he consistently maintains a pastoral heart and tone while exposing the sins of Christendom and writes comfortingly and restoratively to those who would seek a way back to God.

One aspect of Owen's pastoral approach is his distinction between partial and total apostasy, as he gives directives both to those afflicted in their consciences and those comfortable in their courses of sin. He afflicts the comfortable by showing that there is more than one way to apostatize and that churches and individuals who have not yet totally apostatized can still be charged with partial apostasy. Yet he comforts the afflicted throughout by refuting various ways Hebrews 6:4–6 has been misapplied in church history to the hurt of Christians who had but sought to return to God. Owen unequivocally affirms the recoverability of partial apostates and invites all who are convicted of their sin to return to God. His common refrain is that those who have fallen into sin can still be recovered if they are penitent but that those who have rejected Christ and are arrogant and driven forward in their sin have no hope of recovery. He repeatedly insists that Hebrews 6:4–6 is not referring to those whose consciences are prompting them to seek a course of repentance. Pastors, ministers of the word, and anyone involved in Christian discipleship should strive to emulate the careful manner in which Owen applies both the warnings and the comforts of Scripture to people in various spiritual conditions.

Another aspect of Owen's pastoral approach is his care to distinguish three gospel domains one may apostatize from: the doctrines of the gospel, the holiness of the gospel, and the worship of the gospel. If there is such a thing as partial apostasy, which Owen demonstrates there is, and if one can differentiate apostasy into defections from gospel doctrine, holiness,

or worship, then the charge of partial and even total apostasy ought to be cause for serious self-examination for many Christians today in light of the church's "chronic worldliness" where we often trade the simple spirituality and piety of evangelical religion for the ideas, tastes, methods, and goals of the world.²⁵⁵ Many twenty-first-century Christians who think they cannot be charged with even partial apostasy could scarcely read Owen's treatise without conviction. Thus, partial apostasy is a useful category for stimulating Christians to search their hearts and repent of harmful tendencies in spiritual life, doctrine, morality, and worship.

Confronting Errors of Doctrine and about the Human Mind with the Primacy of the Gospel

Owen devotes nearly half of this treatise to one type of apostasy: doctrinal apostasy. Apostasy usually commences with false doctrine, faulty views of truth, errors about the human mind, and attacks on the integrity of supernatural revelation. Overall, it just as important for us today to acquire, retain, and defend the truths and doctrines of the gospel as it was for Owen. We live at the end of more than a century of denigration and denial of the need for orthodoxy in doctrine. In addition, we should note well that apostasy from the holiness and the worship of the gospel can correlate with, result from, or cause apostasy from gospel doctrine. These interlinking types of apostasy should give us sobering pause to ask whether we may yet be in the danger of apostasy when we change our lifestyle or mute our message to be more readily accepted by the world, make decisions to adopt changes in worship style without asking whether such innovations are sanctioned by God's word,²⁵⁶ implement church-growth methodologies without considering their biblical warrant or long-term effects on biblical priorities in the church's life, or allow unbiblical factiousness in our churches to harden into divisions—all while remaining confident in how evangelical and denominationally faithful we

²⁵⁵ David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 197.

²⁵⁶ For contemporary Reformed applications of the regulative principle, see Ligon Duncan III, *Does God Care How We Worship?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020); Philip G. Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and Ligon Duncan III, *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship: Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011); Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002). For a contemporary example of how Reformed Christians have debated with each other about the application of the regulative principle to worship (e.g., adopting contemporary music), see Darryl G. Hart, "It May Be Refreshing, But Is It Reformed?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 32, no. 2 (1997), 407–23.

seem to be. Owen's superlative contribution here is that truth touches not only the head, but also the heart and the hands, and that humble self-examination in the spirit of 1 Corinthians 10:12 is the perennial need of every Christian.

Owen's treatise was in many ways ahead of its time, particularly in how it addressed the arrogance and autonomy of human rationalism, which enthrones reason as the final arbiter of truth and dismisses supernatural things out of hand. In chapter 6, we can see Owen refuting the rationalism that was increasingly becoming the spirit of his age and would continue after his time to bloom into what has been called the Enlightenment. In the hundred years after the close of the seventeenth century, the "rise of modern science" and the "growth of historical criticism," along with other factors, caused a massive cultural and intellectual shift in Europe and America, where a growing hostility toward Christianity and supernaturalism coincided with an erosion of confidence in traditional authority structures in church and state, an increasing call for "the rule of reason," and the assertion of human autonomy. Writing his treatise on apostasy in the dawning days of the Enlightenment, Owen's critique of its underlying impulses and sentiments exposes its pride, spiritual bankruptcy, and amenability to apostasy. Owen shows us the limits and ultimate failure, like Icarus's man-made wings, of unbridled human reason.

But Owen's contribution to a healthy view of truth, reason, and the human mind does not end with his remarks on rationalism. He also confronted a form of irrationalism, challenging those who depended on a mystical and subjective "light within" to lead them.²⁵⁷ For instance, in chapter 7 Owen confronted those who rejected the person, grace, and work of Christ, writing,

Wherefore in an opposition unto [the sovereignty of God], they have set up their light within as the rule, measure, and judge of the truths and doctrines of the gospel. Instead of becoming fools by a resignation of their reason and wisdom to the sovereignty of God, that so they might in the issue be really wise, they have become wise in their own conceit, and have waxed vain in their foolish imaginations.²⁵⁸

In these and other remarks, Owen was not calling for the abandonment of reason but for its submission to God's word and divine sovereignty.

²⁵⁷ By "irrational" I mean a dependence upon one's subjective, human experience "rather than upon objective truth." Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 882.

²⁵⁸ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 7.

Owen's Counsel on Sin, Sanctification, and Assurance in the Christian Life

One of the gospel graces that Owen is known for discussing at length is the practice of “killing” sin, or mortification. In *The Nature of Apostasy*, Owen's masterful treatment of the inner condition of the human heart in the face of sin, the flesh, and temptations as well as the need to experience the influence of grace, the Holy Spirit, and gospel truth, is put on display, especially in his treatment of apostasy from gospel holiness and practical applications (chaps. 8–13).

Owen's work on mortification first appeared in a collection of sermons he preached to students at Oxford, published as *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656), and in summary form in *Discourse on the Holy Spirit* (1674).²⁵⁹ In the former, Owen expressed his concern that “true evangelical mortification is almost lost among us” and that “the broad light” and “many spiritual gifts” that had been given to his generation, which had “wonderfully enlarged the bounds of professors and profession,” had not been “matched by appropriate progress in godliness.”²⁶⁰ At the same time, he wanted to make it clear that he was not teaching mere “self-wrought-out mortification” promoted by those who were “unacquainted with the mystery of the gospel and the efficacy of the death of Christ.”²⁶¹ Doubtless Owen had at least the Socinians in mind here, whose moralistic bent attributed to people's own power the ability to live some sort of “religious,” moral life but did not root that morality in the regenerating work of the Spirit. His critique applies equally to the later Holiness Movement, the many forms of perfectionism, and more recent evangelical schemes for self-improvement, in which psychology is substituted for theology.

Owen's gift for ministering to Christians in their struggle for sanctification shines most brightly in *The Nature of Apostasy* in chapters 8, 12, and 13. At the close of chapter 8, as Owen explains in his third major point

²⁵⁹ Griffiths, *Redeem the Time*, 209.

²⁶⁰ John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers: The 1. Necessity, 2. Nature, and 3. Means of It, with a Resolution of Sundry Cases of Conscience Thereunto Belonging* (Oxford: T. Robinson, 1656), 26; Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 166.

²⁶¹ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 166; Owen, *Mortification of Sin*, “To the Reader.” Contrary to Gleason's statement that polemics was not Owen's primary concern in his work on mortification, “polemical intent was indeed at the very heart of Owen's teaching on mortification. It is almost impossible to separate positive exposition from polemic in the seventeenth-century theological context.” Griffiths, *Redeem the Time*, 210; cf. Randall C. Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification: A Comparative Study in Reformed Spirituality* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1995), 153.

how pretended perfectionists fall away from the gospel, he provides an insightful treatment of the constant inner warfare that is necessary but that many neglect, the habitual sins that many tolerate, and the love for worldly reputation that makes many devalue gospel holiness. At the end of chapter 12, Owen's pastoral heart goes out to those who want to pursue holiness but find that some habitual, particular sin thwarts them. He incisively delineates "three degrees in the power and prevalence of sin" so that readers may consider which kind has befallen them. Then, Owen gives directives for those under the power of any holiness-quenching sin: to seek counsel from an able spiritual guide, to violently and suddenly execute resolves against the first insinuation of the sin "without any parley or debate" (Matt. 5:29–30), and to be devoted to constant, private prayer against the power of the sin. In the middle of chapter 13, one of Owen's directives for avoiding the power of apostasy is keeping the heart, for "the beginnings of all men's spiritual declensions are in their own hearts and spirits." It is "no good bargain" to exchange our hearts for the world: "for while [the heart] is employed to keep our lives, to keep the world, and the things of it, it is lost itself in worldliness, covetousness, carnal wisdom, negligence of holy duties, and barrenness in the fruits of righteousness."²⁶² As present-day readers of *The Nature of Apostasy*, we should apply Owen's heart-searching reminder and methods to ourselves, for "if we should now neglect a watchful care over our own hearts, and a diligent attendance unto all means of their preservation in soundness of doctrine and holiness of life, what assurance can we have that we shall finally escape?"²⁶³

In these sections, and in other places throughout the work, Owen shows great pastoral concern and theological skill to deal with the Christian's struggle with sin, the need for personal assurance of the truths of the faith, and the duty to seek God's power to prevent personal and communal apostasy.

Owen's Concern for the Integrity of Ministers and the Health of the Church

The fact that Owen devotes an entire chapter (chap. 9) to defects in ministerial integrity or faithfulness along with eight other causes of apostasy

²⁶² Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 13. For a fuller treatment on this subject, see John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed: Or the Great Work of a Christian, Opened and Pressed; from Prov. 4. 23, Being a Seasonable and Proper Expedient for the Recovery of the Much Decayed Power of Godliness, among the Professors of these Times* (London: W. R., 1668).

²⁶³ Owen, *Nature of Apostasy*, chap. 13.

into profaneness and sensuality of life (chaps. 9–10)—and that the majority of this chapter presents exhortations to ministers on how to keep their vocation pure—is significant. It should alert us to the priority Owen places on ministerial integrity and faithfulness because of its consequences for the church's steadfastness against apostasy from gospel doctrine, holiness, and worship. Readers today, whether pastors or church members, should look for the marks of ministerial faithfulness Owen lays out in this chapter, not being content with the status quo but continually striving to reform and improve the pastors, preachers, and teachers in their midst. Ministers should listen to the injunction, "Take heed unto thyself" (1 Tim. 4:16). In a day when numerous Christian pastors across the theological spectrum are falling into scandal and defecting from the gospel, Owen's charge to ministers in this section is well worth meditating on and seeking God's power to apply. Faithful ministers are instrumental for the building of faithful churches.

In chapter 13, Owen's last directive for avoiding apostasy (avoid the errors of professing Christians who alienate others from the gospel) reveals his heart for the character or quality of corporate church life. These "errors" are a lack of love and unity among professing Christians, a lack of usefulness and kindness toward all people, spiritual pride, and rash judgment of others. Churches in the twenty-first century seem to persevere in the routines of church life while accepting many or all of these "errors" without flinching. Owen's helpful guidance shows us that the censoriousness, lack of unity and love, and rash judgment of other Christians, which are so common in contemporary church life—and are doubtless fueled by the vitriolic ethos of the internet age where Christians use digital communication to tear each other down—are a gateway to apostasy from gospel doctrine, holiness, and worship.²⁶⁴ Owen's section in chapter 9 on how professing Christians discredit the gospel by contentions, divisions, and ineffectiveness in doing good—and how this interfaces with backsliding from gospel holiness—is well worth prayerfully reflecting upon and seeking the grace of the Spirit to remedy through a renewed use of the means of grace.

By dividing apostasy into three forms based on the object of our defection (doctrine, holiness, or worship), and by skillfully viewing it along a continuum of two degrees through the lens of Romans 11:11 (partial or total apostasy),

²⁶⁴ For a challenging argument that there are sins considered more acceptable among Christians, see Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate* (Colorado Springs: Nav-Press, 2007). For how many of these sins are played out and amplified on the internet, see Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 163–76.

Owen brings the indictment of all kinds of apostasy much closer to home for all of us. *The Nature of Apostasy* teaches us that our need for deep repentance, Spirit-wrought sanctification, and the righting of so many wrongs is probably far greater than we think because the danger of apostasy is far nearer than we have assumed.

Outline

THE FOLLOWING IS an outline of Owen's *The Nature of Apostasy from the Gospel* that reflects the chapter titles and headings that appear in the treatise after Owen's preface.

- I. Chapter 1: Apostasy defined from Hebrews 6:4–6
- II. An exposition of Hebrews 6:4–6
- III. Historical errors in interpreting Hebrews 6:4–6
- IV. The context of Hebrews 6:4–6
- V. The privileges the apostates enjoyed
 - A. The apostates were once enlightened, not merely baptized
 - B. The apostates had tasted of the heavenly gift
 1. The meaning of “heavenly gift”
 2. The meaning of “tasting” the heavenly gift
 - C. The apostates were made partakers of the Holy Ghost
 - D. The apostates had tasted the goodness of the word of God
 1. What does the “goodness” refer to?
 2. How do apostates taste the good word, and to what effect?
 - E. The apostates had tasted the powers of the world to come
- VI. Who the apostates were and what they fell from
 - A. They had never been true believers
 - B. They fell from light, gifts, privileges, and profession into a course of sin
 - C. This “falling away” is a total renunciation of the principal doctrines of Christianity
- VII. How and why the renewal of apostates is impossible
 - A. The renewal of apostates is impossible

1. The meaning of “it is impossible”
2. The meaning of “to renew”
3. Summary of the apostle’s argument
4. How God exercises his severity
- B. Renewal is impossible because the sin of apostates, crucifying Christ again, is unpardonable
 1. How apostates crucify the Son of God again to themselves
 2. How apostates commit a greater sin than Christ’s earthly crucifixion
 3. Apostasy is always willful obstinance
- VIII. Chapter 2: The prevalence of partial apostasy and the error of Rome’s indefectibility
- IX. What partial apostasy consists of
- X. Refutation of the Roman Catholic Church’s claims to infallibility
 - A. Rome has denied Christ
 - B. Rome sets up a form of godliness but despises its power
 - C. Rome claims the gifts and graces of the Spirit but has departed from the truth
- XI. Chapter 3: Apostasy from gospel truth and the church’s proneness to it throughout history
- XII. The gospel is not only profession, but doctrine, obedience, and keeping the faith in trial
- XIII. Instances and predictions of apostasy in the New Testament
 - A. The New Testament churches in apostolic times
 - B. The New Testament’s predictions of apostasy
- XIV. Instances of apostasy in the early church
- XV. The Reformation, following a time of decay, was a work of God
- XVI. The regression of the Reformed churches into error and heresy
 - A. Regression into Roman Catholicism
 - B. Regression into Arminianism
 - C. Regression into Socinianism
- XVII. Chapter 4: Enmity toward spiritual things as the first cause of apostasy from gospel truth
- XVIII. The first cause of apostasy: Mankind’s innate enmity toward spiritual truth

- A. Man's innate enmity toward gospel truth necessitates a renewal of the mind by gospel power
- B. The means of preservation of true religion in the face of temptations to defect
 - 1. The power of the state is an ineffective means to stem the influx of popery
 - 2. Only the renewal of the inner person by the gospel's power can preserve gospel profession
 - 3. Only the diligent ministerial dispensation of the word can prevent a revolt from the truth
- C. Enmity toward gospel truths fills the mind with a love of sin and the life with wicked works
 - 1. People's love of sin is the cause of spiritual decay and Roman Catholic apostasy
 - 2. People's general aim is to live heedlessly in sin
- XIX. Chapter 5: Spiritual darkness and ignorance as the second cause of apostasy from gospel truth
- XX. Natural or innate spiritual darkness in the minds of men
 - A. Sin depraves and darkens people's minds
 - B. The gospel proposes beautiful and glorious spiritual truths
 - C. Only spiritual illumination brings the power and efficacy of gospel truth to people's minds
 - D. Without spiritual illumination, people cannot withstand temptation or seductions to apostatize
 - 1. The elect have a stability in their profession unlike those who are merely learned, but spiritually blind
 - 2. The fault for the ungodliness in Christians' lives is not the gospel, but their own darkness
 - 3. False, outward religion is based on depraved affections and cannot motivate true spirituality
 - 4. The barrenness of people's minds is what causes the gospel not to impact their lives
 - E. Four exhortations in our duty to obtain a spiritual acquaintance with the truths of the gospel
- XXI. Ignorance of the doctrines of the gospel
 - A. A traditional, outward general profession of religion is useless
 - 1. The Roman Catholic Church uses various means to keep its followers in ignorance

- 2. A general, merely traditional profession of Protestantism makes men susceptible to temptation
- B. Ignorance underscores the great responsibility for teachers of the gospel to be diligent
- XXII. Chapter 6: Pride, sloth, worldliness, and Satan as the third through sixth causes of apostasy from gospel truth
- XXIII. The third cause of apostasy: Pride and vanity of mind
 - A. Men must humble themselves in order to perceive and understand the gospel
 - B. The schoolmen exemplify how human pride obstructs our understanding of the gospel
 - C. There is reason in the gospel, but where reason reaches its limits, revelation must take over
 - D. The gospel addresses both the weakness and corruption of human reason
 - E. Pride begets uninhibited human rationalism, which is the root of all heresies
 - F. The arrogant application of human reason to spiritual truths is exemplified in Socinianism
 - G. As Socinianism spreads, so does atheism
- XXIV. The fourth cause of apostasy: Sloth and negligence arising from careless, false security
 - A. Careless security leads men into proud negligence
 - B. Careless security works by an indifference to all things in religion
 - C. Careless security works by spiritual overconfidence
- XXV. The fifth cause of apostasy: Love of this present world
- XXVI. A sixth factor in apostasy: Satan's influence
 - A. Satan tries to keep men from receiving the gospel
 - B. Satan tries to draw away men who have received the gospel
- XXVII. God's judicial response against those who forsake the truth
 - A. God removes his light, plunging men into ignorance and darkness
 - B. God sends men strong delusions that they may believe a lie
 - C. God smites men with blindness and hardness of heart
- XXVIII. Chapter 7: Rejection of the gospel of grace and the reasons for it

- XXIX. Indifference to the necessity and benefits of Christ and his mediation
 - A. Knowledge of sin and its guilt is essential
 - B. Knowledge of the insufficiency of our duties is essential
- XXX. Lack of a spiritual view of the excellency of Christ's person and offices
- XXXI. Lack of experience of the Spirit and grace of Christ for the mortification of sin
- XXXII. Ignorance of the righteousness of God
 - A. The righteousness of God that is in him
 - B. The righteousness God requires of us in the law
 - C. The righteousness God has offered to us in the gospel
- XXXIII. Lack of submission to the sovereignty of God
- XXXIV. Lack of honor for the Scriptures as divinely authoritative
- XXXV. Chapter 8: Apostasy from the holiness of the gospel by substituting it with pretended duties
- XXXVI. The "latter-day" apostasy Paul predicts is now here
- XXXVII. Paul's prediction is advantageous to the sincere and upright
- XXXVIII. Key premises for understanding apostasy from gospel holiness and obedience
- XXXIX. Two kinds of apostasy from gospel holiness: Substitution and sensuality
 - A. Apostasy from gospel holiness into pretended duties in Roman Catholicism
 - B. Apostasy from the holiness of the gospel into mere moralism
 - C. Reasons people with pretended obedience or imagined perfection fall away from gospel holiness
 1. Gospel holiness requires diligent maintenance, constant warfare, and forsaking sloth
 2. Gospel holiness is incompatible with habitual sins of omission or commission
 3. Gospel holiness usually does not increase men's glory or reputation in the world
- XL. Chapter 9: Apostasy from gospel holiness into sensuality and how ministers influence it
- XLI. The influence of ministers in people's apostasy into profaneness and sensuality

- A. Indispensable requirements for ministers and teachers in the church
- B. Ministers must keep the doctrine of the gospel pure and uncorrupted
- C. Scripture, believers' hearts and minds, and the ministry can be truth-preserving repositories
- D. Ministers must diligently instruct people in the whole counsel of God
- E. Ministers must live lives that accurately represent the gospel and God's character
- F. Ministers must diligently administer church discipline
- XLII. Chapter 10: The second through eighth causes and occasions of apostasy from gospel holiness
- XLIII. A false appropriation of justifying names and titles
- XLIV. The public sin of prominent religious leaders
 - XLV. Professing Christians persecuting one another
- XLVI. Lack of watchfulness against the insinuation of prevailing national vices
- XLVII. Mistakes about the beauty and glory of Christian religion
- XLVIII. Satan taking advantage of seasons of apostasy
- XLIX. Christians discrediting the gospel by their divisiveness and ineffectiveness
 - L. Overall indictment: Apostasy from gospel holiness as crucifying afresh the Son of God
- LI. Chapter 11: Apostasy from gospel-centered worship: Forsaking divine ordinances, or adding what is not divinely ordained
- LII. Apostatizing from evangelical worship by failing to observe what Christ appointed
- LIII. Apostatizing from evangelical worship by adding unordained, man-made elements into worship
- LIV. Chapter 12: The danger and evil of apostasy: Warnings to the carelessly overconfident and counsel for the sincerely concerned
- LV. Six warnings to the carelessly overconfident
 - A. The universality of apostasy is a caution against heedless overconfidence and false security
 - B. Apostasy and love for sin are spreading like an epidemic
 - C. God may allow this apostasy to engulf most visible professing Christianity for a time

- D. There is a great variety of ways that apostasy from the doctrine, the holiness, and the worship of the gospel is promoted
 - E. God may recover apostates, but there is a kind of apostasy that is irrecoverable
 - F. The heinousness of total, irrecoverable apostasy shown by its seven aspects
- LVI. Two words of counsel for the sincerely concerned
- A. To those who fear they have forsaken God and that God has abandoned them in their sins
 - B. To those whose habitual, besetting sin constantly disrupts their pursuit of holiness
- LVII. Chapter 13: Five essential ways to remain vigilant against falling into apostasy
- LVIII. Labor for a real sense of the glory of God and our duty in the matter of apostasy
- A. Mourn over the prevalence of sin and apostasy in the church
 - B. Pray for the restoration of the church
 - C. Be constant in testifying against the prevalence of apostasy
- LIX. Keep watch over your hearts to maintain duties and to guard against dangers
- A. Keep your heart awake and attentive to its own deceitfulness
 - B. Keep your heart awake and attentive to its only help and relief: Jesus Christ
 - C. Keep your heart attentive to its own spiritual condition, and progress or decay in holiness
- LX. Beware of merely resting in the outward privileges or ordinances of the church
- A. Being deceived or lulled into complacency by your own or others' spiritual gifts
 - B. Esteeming one way of worship so highly that you despise those of a different persuasion
 - C. In sum, neither neglect nor rest complacently in the ordinances and privileges of the church, but humbly improve them unto their proper ends
- LXI. Beware of the influence of vices prevalent in your nation
- LXII. Avoid the errors of professing Christians who alienate others from the gospel

THE NATURE OF
APOSTASY FROM
THE PROFESSION OF
THE GOSPEL AND
THE PUNISHMENT OF
APOSTATES DECLARED,

in

an Exposition of Heb. 6:4–6;

with

*an Inquiry into the Causes and Reasons
of the Decay of the Power of Religion in
the World, or the Present General Defection
from the Truth, Holiness, and Worship of the
Gospel; Also, of the Proneness of Churches
and Persons of All Sorts unto Apostasy.
With Remedies and Means of Prevention.*

Search the Scriptures.

JOHN 5:39

London, 1676

Apostasy from the Gospel

Contents

- To the Reader 79
- 1 Apostasy Defined from Hebrews 6:4–6 93
 - 2 The Prevalence of Partial Apostasy and the Error of Rome's Indefectibility 145
 - 3 Apostasy from Gospel Truth and the Church's Proneness to It throughout History 157
 - 4 Enmity toward Spiritual Things as the First Cause of Apostasy from Gospel Truth 183
 - 5 Spiritual Darkness and Ignorance as the Second Cause of Apostasy from Gospel Truth 209
 - 6 Pride, Sloth, Worldliness, and Satan as the Third through Sixth Causes of Apostasy from Gospel Truth 233
 - 7 Rejection of the Gospel of Grace and the Reasons for It 261
 - 8 Apostasy from the Holiness of the Gospel by Substituting It with Pretended Duties 279
 - 9 Apostasy from Gospel Holiness into Sensuality and How Ministers Influence It 307
 - 10 The Second through Eighth Causes and Occasions of Apostasy from Gospel Holiness 325

- 11 Apostasy from Gospel-Centered Worship: Forsaking Divine Ordinances, or Adding What Is Not Divinely Ordained 351
- 12 The Danger and Evil of Apostasy: Warnings to the Carelessly Overconfident and Counsel for the Sincerely Concerned 359
- 13 Five Essential Ways to Remain Vigilant against Falling into Apostasy 381

These chapter titles have been added by the editor. Owen's original chapter titles and summary statements appear below them within each chapter.

To the Reader

SOME BRIEF ACCOUNT of the occasion and design of the ensuing discourse I judge due unto the reader, that, upon a prospect of them, he may either proceed in its perusal or desist, as he shall see cause.

That the state of religion is at this day deplorable in most parts of the Christian world is acknowledged by all who concern themselves in anything that is so called. Yea, the enormities of some are come to that excess that others publicly complain of them, who, without the countenance¹ of their more bold provocations, would themselves be judged no small part or cause of the evils to be complained of. However, this, on all hands, will, as I suppose, be agreed unto, that among the generality of professed Christians, the glory and power of Christianity are faded and almost utterly lost, though the reasons and causes thereof are not agreed upon. For however some few may please themselves in supposing nothing to be wanting unto a good state of things in religion, but only security in what they are and enjoy, yet the whole world is so evidently filled with the dreadful effects of the lusts of men, and sad tokens of divine displeasure, that all things from above and here below proclaim the degeneracy² of our religion, in its profession, from its pristine beauty and glory. Religion is the same that ever it was, only it suffers by them that make profession of it. Whatever disadvantage it falls under in the world, they must at length answer for in whose misbelief and practice it is corrupted. And no man can express a greater enmity unto or malice against the gospel, than he that should assert or maintain that the faith, profession, lives, ways, and walkings of the generality of Christians are a just representation of its truth and holiness. The description which the apostle gives of men in their principles, dispositions, and actings, before

¹ I.e., approval.

² I.e., decline.

there has been any effectual³ influence on their minds and lives from the light, power, and grace of the gospel, is much more applicable unto them than anything that is spoken of the disciples of Christ in the whole book of God: “Foolish are they, and disobedient, deceived, serving divers⁴ lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another.”⁵ The way, paths, and footsteps of gospel faith, love, meekness, temperance, self-denial, benignity,⁶ humility, zeal, and contempt of the world, in the honors, profits, and pleasures of it, with readiness for the cross, are all overgrown, and almost worn out among men, that they can hardly be discerned where they have been. But in their stead the “works of the flesh”⁷ have made a broad and open road that the multitude travel in, which, though it may be right for a season in their own eyes, yet is the way to hell, and goes down to the chambers of death; for these works of the flesh are manifest in the world, not only in their nature, what they are, but in their open perpetration and dismal effects. Such are “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulation, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such-like,” as they are reckoned up by the apostle.⁸ How these things have spread themselves over the face of the Christian world, among all sorts of persons, is manifest beyond all contradiction or pretense to the contrary. And that so it should come to pass in the “latter times”⁹ is both expressly and frequently foretold in the Scripture, as in the ensuing discourse will be more fully declared.

Many, indeed, there are who are not given up in the course of their lives unto the open practice of such abominations; and therefore in that grand defection from the truth and holiness of the gospel which is so prevalent in the world, the grace of God is greatly to be admired, even in the small remainders of piety, sobriety, and modesty, and common usefulness that are yet left among us. But those openly flagitious¹⁰ courses are not the only way whereby men may fall off from, and even renounce, the power, grace, and wisdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. For even of those who will not run out to the same excess of riot with other men, the most are so ignorant of the mysteries of the gospel, so negligent or formal in divine worship, so infected

3 I.e., successful.

4 I.e., various.

5 Titus 3:3.

6 I.e., kindly, gracious, or favorable disposition.

7 Gal. 5:19.

8 Gal. 5:19–21.

9 1 Tim. 4:1–5.

10 I.e., villainous.

with pride, vanity, and love of the world, so regardless of the glory of Christ and honor of the gospel, that it is no easy thing to find Christian religion in the midst of professed Christians, or the power of godliness among them who openly avow the form thereof.

By this means is Christianity brought into so great neglect in the world, that its great and subtle adversary seems encouraged to attempt the ruining of its very foundations, that the name of it should no more be had in remembrance; for wherever religion is taken off from a solid consistency by its power in the lives and minds of men, when it has no other tenure¹¹ but an outward, unenlivened¹² profession, and the secular interest of its professors, it will not long abide the shock of that opposition which it is continually exposed unto. And while things are in this state, those who seem to have any concernment¹³ therein are so engaged in mutual charging one another with being occasions thereof, mostly on such principles of difference in judgment as have no considerable influence thereinto, as that a joint endeavor after proper remedies is utterly neglected.

And there is yet another consideration rendering the present state of Christian religion in the world yet more deplorable. The only principle of evangelical obedience is sacred truth, and our faith therein. That alone is the “doctrine which is according to godliness,” and all acceptable obedience unto God is the “obedience of faith.”¹⁴ Whatever men do or pretend unto in a way of duty unto him, whereof the truth of the gospel is not the spring and measure, which is not guided and animated thereby, it is not what God at present requires, nor what he will eternally reward. Wherefore, although men may, and multitudes do, under a profession of that truth, live in open rebellion against its power, yet the wounds of religion are not incurable, nor its stains indelible, while the proper remedy is owned and wants only due application. But if this truth itself be corrupted or deserted, if its most glorious mysteries be abused or despised, if its most important doctrines be impeached of error and falsehood, if the vain imaginations and carnal reasonings of the serpentine¹⁵ wits of men be substituted in their room¹⁶ or exalted above them, what hope is there of a recovery? The breach will grow

11 “Tenor” (in the sense of the drift or substance of a written or spoken statement) may be Owen’s intended meaning.

12 I.e., not enlivened or brightened.

13 I.e., interest; participation; involvement.

14 1 Tim. 6:3; Rom. 1:5, 16:26.

15 I.e., cunning; wily; malevolent.

16 I.e., in their place.

like the sea, until there be none to heal it. If the fountains of the waters of the sanctuary be poisoned in their first rising, they will not heal the nations unto whom they come. Where the doctrine of truth is corrupted, the hearts of men will not be changed by it, nor their lives reformed.

How all this has come to pass in the apostasy of the Roman church, and what multitudes of professed Christians are carried down the stream of that defection, is acknowledged among us who are called Protestants. How, therein, by various degrees, the corruption of the doctrine of the gospel gave occasion unto the depravation of men's manners on the one hand, and the wickedness of men's lives on the other hand, led the way unto, and served to make necessary, a further perverting of the doctrine itself, until at length it is hard to determine whether the multiplied errors of that church have made the reintroduction of true holiness and evangelical obedience, or the corrupt, worldly conversation of the generality of the members of its communion has rendered the restoration of truth, more difficult and unpracticable in their present station, is in part declared in the ensuing discourses, and deserves yet a more particular and distinct inquiry into. In general, certain it is that as error, with superstition, on the one hand, in the minds of the teachers or guides of the church, and sin, with conformity unto the ways, manners, and course of the present evil world in the body of the people, were mutually assistant unto their joint introduction into the profession and lives of Christians; so having possessed themselves of the visible church state of many nations, they are so interwoven in their interests as to be mutually assistant to the exclusion of that truth and holiness which they have dispossessed. And whereas, moreover, they have found out the pretense of infallibility, stretched wide enough, in their own apprehensions, to cover, patronize, and justify the most enormous errors and highest inconformity of life unto the gospel, all hopes of their recovery are utterly defeated, but what are placed on the sovereign grace and almighty power of God.

That there is also another endeavor of the same kind, and for the same general end, namely to corrupt the doctrine of the gospel, though in another way, and unto another extreme, vigorously carried on in the world by the Socinians, and those who either absolutely or for the most part comply with them in their pernicious ways, is no less known, nor ought to be much less bewailed. For this endeavor also is attended with many advantages to give it success. The corruption of the doctrine of the gospel in the Roman church, as it sprang out of the ignorance, darkness, superstition, and carnal affections of the minds of men; so it is by the same means preserved. But although those things, in those ages and places where they abounded, gave sufficient and

effectual advantage to its gradual introduction, and although the principles of it be now so inlaid with the secular interests of the generality of mankind in most of the nations in Europe as to secure its station and possessions; yet, in that emancipation of reason from under the bond of superstition and tradition, in that liberty of rational inquiry unto the true nature and causes of all things, in that refusal to captivate their understandings in religion to the bare authority of men no wiser than themselves, which all pretend unto at present who dare venture on an ordinary converse in the world, it may seem marvelous how it should get ground and enlarge its territories, unless it be among them who are evidently bought off from themselves and from under the conduct of their own minds by some outward advantages, which they look upon as a valuable consideration. The true reasons hereof are inquired into in the ensuing discourse. But this new attempt, despising the baffled aids of superstition and carnal affections, which were in former ages predominant and effectual, takes shelter under a pretense of reason, and the suitability of what is proposed in it unto the natural light and understandings of men. Whatever there is or is not in this matter of the relation that is between religion and reason, yet this being grown, through the increase of learning and converse, with a decay of the true fear of God, the very idol of this age, whoever will prepare a sacrifice unto it, though it be of the most holy mysteries of the gospel, he shall not fail of good entertainment and applause; and whoever shall refuse to cast incense on its altar shall be sure to be exploded, as one that professes himself to be a fool, and even a common enemy unto mankind. Tell men that there are some things in religion that are above reason, as it is finite and limited, and some things contrary unto it, as it is depraved¹⁷ and corrupted, and they will reply (what is true in itself, but woefully abused) that yet their reason is the best, yea, only means which they have to judge of what is true or false. The liberty of men's own rational faculties having got the great vogue in the world (as indeed it is that which is most excellent therein of what is merely in and of it), it is fond to expect that it should not meet with a pernicious abuse, as everything that has any worth in it has always done, when advanced unto such a reputation as might render it liable thereunto; for no man will ever adventure¹⁸ to prevail himself of that which others have no respect unto or do despise. ¶¹⁹

Herein, then, lies the advantage of this sort of men, the Socinians I mean, and their adherents, in attempting to corrupt the doctrine of the gospel, and hereon

¹⁷ I.e., maligned.

¹⁸ I.e., risk, dare, or take a chance to do something.

¹⁹ The ¶ symbol indicates that a paragraph break has been added to Owen's original text.

depends all their success therein: First,²⁰ they get the advantage of the ground in general, by pretending to reduce all men unto right reason, as the just measure and standard of truth. Put in any exceptions unto this proposal, endeavor to affix its bounds and proper measure, offer the consideration of divine revelation in its proper use and place, and you give away the cause among the many, who design at least to come in as common sharers in the reputation that reason has got above all things in the world. By the confident use of this artifice, and the most absurd application of this principle unto things infinite and the most holy mysteries of divine revelation, have this sort of men, otherwise, for the most part, as weak and insufficient in their reasonings as their predecessors in the like attempts, got the reputation of the most rational handlers of sacred things. And when, being harnessed with this advantage, they proceed to the proposal of their opinions in particular, they have such an interest beforehand in the minds of men by nature, and have things so disposed and prepared for their reception, that it is no wonder if oftentimes²¹ they obtain success.¶

For they are all of them designed unto one of these two heads. First, that there is no reason why we should believe anything that reason cannot comprehend; so that we may safely conclude that whatever is above our reason is contrary unto it; and for what is so, it is destructive to the very natural constitution of our souls not to reject. And, secondly, that the mind of man is, in its present condition, every way sufficient unto the whole of its duties, both intellectual and moral, with respect unto God, and to answer whatever is required of us. Upon the matter, they pretend only to undertake the patronage of human nature, and the common reason and honesty of mankind, against those imputations²² of weakness, depravations, and corruption, in things spiritual, wherewith by some it is charged and defamed. And although it be contrary unto the universal experience of the whole world, yet might this design be allowed what commendation men please, so that the defense of nature were not undertaken expressly against the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the redemption that is in his blood, and the whole mystery of the gospel. But whereas it is a part of the depravation of our nature not to discover its own depravations, and all those opinions are suited to give it countenance against what it is not sensible of, and whereof it is not willing to own the charge, it is no wonder if with very many they receive a ready entertainment.²³ And whereas they seem to interest men in that reputation

20 Owen seems to not address what the second point is.

21 I.e., often.

22 I.e., attribution; accusation (as used here).

23 I.e., admittance; reception.

which reason in the things of God has obtained in the world, and thereby to countenance them in the contempt of others as weak and irrational, things pleasing to the depraved minds of men, it is more than probable that they will make a pernicious progress in one degree or another. So does the subtle enemy of our salvation make his advantage of the disposition, inclination, and state of every age and season. Without his interposition, devotion of old might have been carried on without superstition, and in this age the use of reason might be vindicated without a rejection of the necessity of supernatural illumination and the great truths of the gospel. But the better anything is, the more noisome²⁴ it will be when once he has mixed his poison with it.

It were to be wished that the defection from the truth of the gospel complained of were confined unto the instances already mentioned, though in them the event be deplorable among multitudes of professed Christians. But the same, in some measure and degree, is come to pass among Protestants also. Men grow weary of the truths which have been professed ever since the Reformation, yea, of those in particular which gave occasion thereunto, and without which it had never been attempted. For besides that many fall off unto those extremes of error before insisted on, some on the one hand, and some on the other, the Reformed religion is by not a few so taken off from its old foundations, so unhinged from those pillars of important truths which it did depend upon, and so sullied by a confused medley of noisome opinions, as that its loss in reputation of stability and usefulness seems almost irreparable.²⁵ Hence are divisions, debates, and animosities multiplied about the principal articles of our religion, whereby those tongues are divided and

²⁴ I.e., offensive; obnoxious; objectionable.

²⁵ Taken more broadly, Owen's statement here could refer to Jacob Arminius and the Arminians who were challenging the doctrine of the saints' perseverance. Specifically, though it is impossible to know for certain, a number of promoters of "noisome opinions" could have been in Owen's mind. One strong possibility is Arminian author John Goodwin. Owen had already written a treatise in defense of the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints (1654) in response to Goodwin's *Redemption Redeemed* (1651), which denied the perseverance of the saints, argued for universal atonement, and held that Hebrews 6:4–6 describes the fall and perdition of genuine believers. Henry Knapp, "John Owen's Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6: Eternal Perseverance of the Saints in Puritan Exegesis," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 34, no. 1 (2003), 30, 38; Tim Cooper, "Calvinism among Seventeenth-Century English Puritans," in *Oxford Handbook of Calvin and Calvinism*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Carl R. Trueman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 327. Even more likely is Richard Baxter, whose first book, *Aphorismes of Justification* (1649), presented a moderation of Calvinism and critiqued points of Owen's of teaching as being antinomian. Tim Cooper, "Calvinism among Seventeenth-Century English Puritans," 332–33. See "Owen's Polemical Concerns: Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Socinianism" in the editor's introduction.

hands engaged in mutual intestine²⁶ conflicts, which all united were few enough to preserve the remainders of the Protestant profession from the artifices²⁷ and power of him who does not despair once more to impose his yoke on the neck of the whole Christian world. For nothing can more prepare the way of his success than the shaking of the doctrine of the Reformed churches from that consistency wherein for so long a time it stood firm and stable against all opposition.

But there is in this matter nothing absolutely new under the sun. No instance can be given of any church or nation in the world, whichever received the profession of the gospel, that did not, sooner or later, either totally or in some considerable degrees, fall off from the doctrine which it reveals and the obedience which it requires. Men do but deceive themselves who suppose that the purity of religion will be preserved in confessions and canons, while some make it their business to corrupt its truth, and few or none make it their business to preserve its power. And, therefore, at this day, on one account or other, the defection is almost catholic;²⁸ for it is in vain for any to pretend that the present general visible profession of Christianity does in any tolerable measure answer the original pattern of it in the Scripture, or the first transcript thereof in the primitive believers. And that, which in this degenerate state of things, does principally exercise the minds of considerate men, is, whether there ought to be an immediate endeavor to reduce as many as will or can comply therewith unto the original standard in profession, obedience, and worships, or whether the present posture of things be not so far to be complied withal²⁹ as to preserve therein the small remainders of religion among the community of Christians, who are not capable of such a reduction. The difference that is in the judgments of men herein is the ground of all those lesser controversies and opinions, which will be composed and have an end put unto them when God shall graciously afford unto us all a fresh revival of evangelical faith, love, and holiness, and, I fear, not before.

Upon some considerations of this state of things in the world, and under fears, perhaps not altogether groundless, that a further progress will yet be made in this woeful declension from the power and purity of evangelical truth, I set myself unto a general inquiry [as to] what might be the secret

²⁶ I.e., internal (e.g., affairs of a state).

²⁷ I.e., clever strategies or tricks.

²⁸ I.e., universal.

²⁹ I.e., with (here and throughout, unless one of the various other meanings of "withal" is otherwise noted).

causes and reasons whence it is that all sorts of persons, in all ages, have been so prone to apostatize from the sincere profession of the gospel in faith and obedience, as experience in the success of things manifests them to have been. And, moreover, an occasion was administered unto thoughts of that nature from my engagement in the exposition of the sixth chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews, wherein the apostle so eminently describes the nature of total apostasy, with the end of apostates³⁰ in the righteous judgment of God.³¹ For considering the greatness of that sin, and the terror of the Lord with respect thereunto, and not knowing whereunto the daily advance of impiety, profaneness, and abominable lusts, with ignorance, error, and superstition, might at length arrive, thoughtfulness of what might be required at the last day of myself, though cast in a mean and obscure condition in the world, did not a little exercise my mind.³² The glory of God, the honor of Christ and the gospel, and the eternal welfare of the souls of men, being eminently concerned, I knew not how he could have the least satisfaction in the truth and reality of his own Christianity who was not greatly affected with, and did not really mourn for, their suffering in this woeful apostasy. What I have attained unto in that kind I have no reason to declare; but hope I may say, without the offense of any, that as I verily believe neither my prayers nor tears have been proportionable unto the causes of them in this matter, so I can and will say that they have been real and sincere.

I was not ignorant of the weakness and impertinency³³ of all thoughts that a person of my mean condition in the world, disadvantaged by all imaginable

30 I.e., people who forsake their religion.

31 See "Proclaiming the Person of Christ and His Benefits to Believers" in the editor's introduction.

32 Owen's self-characterization as "cast in a mean and obscure condition in the world" seems to support Gribben's thesis that "by the end of his career, Owen had come to believe that his writing had failed to protect orthodox religion; that his preaching had made little impact upon his hearers; that Independent churches had failed to preserve true piety; and that his own greatest failing was his inability to explain the [beleaguered] situation of dissenters by means of the providentialist framework that had provided the infrastructure for his earliest and most politically significant sermons." By the time of Owen's writing of *The Nature of Apostasy*, well into the 1670s, he believed that "the churches were in ruins." His preaching "in the latter years of his life" was dominated by a sense of failure, a foreboding of the future, and astonishment at the level of sinfulness in the churches. Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 256, 271. It is during these latter years that Owen warns his congregation of the presence of "those sins upon the commission of which God pronounces a nation ruined." John Owen, "National Sins and National Judgments," in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1854), 17:549.

33 I.e., inappropriateness; absurdity.

circumstances that might prejudice the most sincere endeavors, should attempt anything with respect unto the relief of nations or national churches, which yet are not without the verge of this fatal evil. To mourn for them in secret, to labor in prayers and supplications for a more plentiful effusion of the Spirit of Christ upon them for their good, are things which, although they may despise, yet God will accept in and from the meanest of them that call on his name in sincerity. Unto whom other opportunities and advantages are granted, from them other things will be required. And it is, no doubt, a great account they have to give who are admitted and esteemed as those whose place and duty it is to stem the current of overflowing impiety and profaneness, and effectually³⁴ to apply the sovereign remedies of all those evils unto the souls and consciences of men. Sad will it be for them under whose hand this breach shall be, if they endeavor not to prevent it with their utmost diligence, and the open hazard of all their earthly concerns. A learned writer of the Church of England affirms

that there were two no small sins of noisome hypocrisy that he had espied among others; the one, an opinion there can be no fit matter of martyrdom in a state authorizing the true profession of that religion which among many we like best, and left unto ourselves would make choice of. The other, which in part feeds this, a persuasion that mere errors in doctrine or opinion are more pernicious than affected indulgence to lewd practices, or continuance in sinful courses, or open breaches of God's commandments.

And after he had declared that “ministers of the gospel may deny Christ, or manifest their being ashamed of the gospel, by not opposing his word as they ought unto the sins of men,” he adds, “that any age, since Christian religion was first propagated, hath wanted store of martyrs, is more to be attributed unto the negligence, ignorance, and hypocrisy, or want of courage in Christ's ambassadors, or appointed pastors, than unto the sincerity, mildness, or fidelity of the flock, especially of the bellwethers³⁵ or chief ringleaders;”³⁶ with

³⁴ I.e., effectively; thoroughly.

³⁵ I.e., wethers (male sheep) that lead the flock, usually wearing a bell; leader; front-runner.

³⁶ In the text: Jac. tom. i. b. 4. c. 4.—Owen. This is a quotation from Thomas Jackson (1579–1640), *Saving Faith, or the Faith whereby the Just Do Live* (London: John Beale, Aldersgate streete, 1615), bk. 4, sec. 2, chap. 4, p. 185. Jackson was “one of the earliest Oxford theologians to move to an anti-Calvinist position” and a target of Owen's earliest work, *A Display of Arminianism* (1643), which critiqued Jackson's *A Treatise of the Divine Essence and Attributes* (1628). Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 47.

much more to the same purpose, which well deserve some men's consideration before all things of this nature be too late.

But there is a duty of trading with a single talent.³⁷ And if there be a ready mind, it is accepted according to what a man has, and not according to what he has not. And this alone has made me adventure the proposal of my thoughts about the nature, causes, and occasions of the present defection from the gospel and decay of holiness, with the means of preservation from its infection, and prevention of its prevalency in private persons. For it is to no purpose to shut up all endeavors under fruitless complaints, nor yet to attempt an opposition unto effects whose causes are not well known and considered. Wherefore the investigation and declaration of the causes of this evil is the principal subject of the ensuing discourses. And if I have attained but thus much, that persons of more understanding and abilities to find out the hidden springs of the inundation³⁸ of sin and errors in the Christian world, and who have more advantages to improve their discoveries unto public good, shall be hereby excited to undertake so necessary a work and duty, I shall esteem myself to have received a full reward.

There is one thing yet whereof I must advise those readers which are pleased to concern themselves in any writings of mine. The publishing of this exposition of some verses of the sixth chapter of the epistle unto the Hebrews may have an appearance of my deserting that continued exposition of the whole epistle which I had designed. But as I know not what I may attain unto in the very near approach of that season wherein I must lay down this tabernacle, and the daily warning which, through many infirmities, I have thereof, so I am resolved while I live to proceed in that work as God shall enable, and other present necessary duties will allow. And the sole reason, added unto the seasonableness, as I supposed, of this discourse, why this part of the exposition is singly proposed unto public view, was because the thoughts which arose thereon were drawn forth into such a length as would have been too great a digression from the context and design of the apostle.

³⁷ I.e., responsibility to venture on an important course of action even if it is feared one's resources for the work or returns from the work are too small. Cf. Matt. 25:14–30.

³⁸ I.e., flood.

The Nature and Causes of Apostasy from the Gospel

Apostasy Defined from Hebrews 6:4–6

*The Nature of Apostasy from the Gospel Declared,
in an Exposition of Hebrews 6:4–6¹*

1. INTENDING AN INQUIRY INTO the nature, causes, and occasions of the present defection that is in the world from the truth, holiness, and worship of the gospel, I shall lay the foundation of my whole discourse in an exposition of that passage in the epistle of Paul the apostle unto the Hebrews, wherein he gives an account both of the nature of apostasy and of the punishment due unto apostates.² For as this will lead us naturally unto what is designed, so an endeavor to free the context from the difficulties wherewith it is generally supposed to be attended, and to explain the mind of the Holy Ghost therein,

1 Chapter titles have been added by the editor. Owen's original chapter titles and summary statements appear below them.

2 On Owen's argument that the apostle Paul wrote Hebrews, see John Owen, *Exercitations on the Epistle to the Hebrews Also concerning the Messiah Wherein the Promises concerning Him to Be a Spiritual Redeemer of Mankind Are Explained and Vindicated, His Coming and Accomplishment of His Work according to the Promises Is Proved and Confirmed, the Person, or Who He Is, Is Declared, the Whole Oeconomy of the Mosaical Law, Rites, Worship, and Sacrifice Is Explained: and in All the Doctrine of the Person, Office, and Work of the Messiah Is Opened, the Nature and Demerit of the First Sin Is Unfolded, the Opinions and Traditions of the Antient and Modern Jews Are Examined, Their Objections against the Lord Christ and the Gospel Are Answered, the Time of the Coming of the Messiah Is Stated, and the Great Fundamental Truths of the Gospel Vindicated: With an Exposition and Discourses on the Two First Chapters of the Said Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Nathaniel Ponder, 1668), 24–39. A summary of the evidence Owen gives for the Pauline authorship of Hebrews can be found in Stephen P. Westcott, *By the Bible Alone! John Owen's Puritan Theology for Today's Church* (Fellsmere, FL: Reformation Media, 2010).

may be neither unacceptable nor unuseful. And this is Hebrews 6:4–6, whose words are these that follow.

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good Word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, (for any) to renew them again to repentance; seeing they crucify again to themselves the Son of God, and put him to open shame (or treat him ignominiously).³

AN EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS 6:4–6

Ἀδύνατον γὰρ.⁴ *Impossibile enim*, that is, *est*—“It is impossible.” מְבַחֵן אֱלֹהִים (Syriac⁵). “But they cannot.” This respects the power of the persons themselves, and not the event of things; it may be not improperly as to the sense. Beza⁶ and Erasmus,⁷ *Fieri non potest*—“It cannot be”; the same with “impossible.” But the use of the word ἀδύνατον⁸ in the New Testament, which signifies sometimes only what is very difficult, not what is absolutely denied, makes it useful to retain the same word, as in our translation, “For it is impossible.”

3 In the text: Ἀδύνατον γὰρ τοὺς ἅπας φωτισθέντας, γευσάμενους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου, καὶ μετόχους γενηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου, καὶ καλὸν γευσάμενους Θεοῦ ῥῆμα, δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος, καὶ παραπεσοντας, πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν, ἀνασταυροῦντας ἑαυτοῖς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ παραδειγματίζοντας.—Owen. Owen’s translation.

4 Gk. “it is impossible.”

5 Syriac is a form of Eastern Aramaic (a Northwestern Semitic language, the same language family that Hebrew belongs to). The Syrian translation of the Bible, the Peshitta, dates from the fifth century AD, although other Syriac translations of parts of the Bible are attested long beforehand among early Christians. Owen is using a version of the Syriac New Testament that is transliterated with Hebrew letters, perhaps a work such as Christophori Plantini, *Novum domini nostri Iesu Christi Novum Testamentum syriace* (1575).

6 Theodore Beza (1519–1605) was an influential Protestant reformer who was a contemporary of John Calvin and his successor in Geneva. Beza’s theological works reflect the humanism that was current in his day and among the Reformers. A resurgence of study of the Greco-Roman classics and the Bible in their original languages characterized humanism. One of Beza’s major works is his *Textus receptus* (1565), a Greek New Testament that saw multiple editions.

7 Desiderius Erasmus, or Erasmus of Rotterdam (ca. 1466–1536), was a Roman Catholic humanist scholar known for publishing the first ever printed edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516, which Martin Luther used to translate the Bible into German. Erasmus is also known for his debates with Luther on predestination.

8 Gk. “impossible.”

Τοὺς ἅπαξ φωτισθέντας.⁹ הַנְּחַתוּ לְמַעַמְּוֹדֵי־חַבְדָּא וְזַבְנֵי הַנְּנָן (Syriac).¹⁰ “Those who one time,” or “once descended unto baptism”; of which interpretation we must speak afterward. All others, *Qui semel fuerint illuminati*—“Who were once enlightened.” Only the Ethiopic¹¹ follows the Syriac. Some read *illustrati*¹² to the same purpose.

Γευσασμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς ἐπουρανίου.¹³ “*Gustaverant etiam donum cceloeeste*”;¹⁴ “*etiam*,”¹⁵ for “*et*.”¹⁶ (Vulgate Latin¹⁷). Others express the article by the pronoun, by reason of its reduplication: “*Et gustaverint donum illud coeleste*”; “And have tasted of that heavenly gift” (Syriac), “The gift that is from heaven.” And this the emphasis in the original seems to require: “And have tasted of that heavenly gift.”

Καὶ μετόχους γεννηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου. “*Et participes facti sunt Spiritus Sancti*” (Vulgate Latin), “And are made partakers of the Holy Ghost.” All others, “*facti fuerint*”; “have been” made partakers of the Holy Ghost; אַשְׁוִּיִּקְטִי אַחְוִּי (Syriac), “The Spirit of holiness.”

Καὶ καλὸν γευσασμένους θεοῦ ῥῆμα.¹⁸ “*Et gustaverunt nihilominus bonum Dei verbum*.” “Have moreover tasted the good Word of God” (Rhem.¹⁹). But “moreover” does not express *nihilominus*: “And have notwithstanding,” which has no place here. Καλὸν ῥῆμα,²⁰ *verbum pulchrum*.²¹

9 Gk. “who once were enlightened.”

10 Syr. “those who one time” or “once descended unto baptism.” The correct spelling is הַנְּחַתוּ לְמַעַמְּוֹדֵי־חַבְדָּא וְזַבְנֵי הַנְּנָן.

11 Classical Ethiopic is a Semitic language that was spoken in Ethiopia and Eritria in the first millennium AD. The Bible and the Apocrypha were translated into classical Ethiopic, and it is still used as a liturgical language in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

12 Lat. “to be lit up.”

13 *Novum Testamentum Graece* reads, γευσασμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου. *Novum Testamentum Graece*, ed. B. Aland et al., 28th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012); hereafter cited as NA²⁸.

14 Lat. “having tasted of the heavenly gift.”

15 Lat. “also.”

16 Lat. “and.”

17 The Vulgate was a Latin translation of the Bible produced by the early church father Jerome in 383–405 and widely used for centuries thereafter, becoming the authorized Bible version of the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in 1546.

18 Gk. “and having tasted the goodness of God’s word.”

19 The Douay-Rheims Bible is a Roman Catholic English translation based mainly on the Latin Vulgate; a product of the Counter-Reformation, it was published in 1582 in response to the rise of Protestant Bible translations. Euan Cameron, “The Counter-Reformation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to The Bible and Culture*, ed. John F. Sawyer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 97.

20 Gk. “the good word.”

21 Lat. “the noble, or illustrious, word.”

Δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος.²² “*Virtutesque seculi futuri*.”²³ אָלִיּוּת (Syriac),²⁴ “*virtutem*”; the “power.” “*seculi venturi*”²⁵ (Vulgate). We cannot in our language distinguish between “*futurum*”²⁶ and “*venturum*,”²⁷ and so under it “the world to come.”

Καὶ παραπεσόντας.²⁸ “*Et prolapsi sunt*”²⁹ (Vulgate). “And are fallen” (Rhem.). Others, *Si prolabantur*,³⁰ which the sense requires: “If they fall,” that is, “away” as our translation, properly. אַשְׁמַרְתָּ אֶתְּחַוֶּה, “That sin again” (Syriac),³¹ somewhat dangerously; for it is one kind of sinning only that is included and expressed.

Πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν.³² *Rursus renovari ad poenitentiam* (Vulgate), “To be renewed again to repentance,” rendering the active verb passively. So Beza also, *Ut denuo renoventur ad resipiscentiam*, “That they should again be renewed to repentance.” The word is active, as rendered by ours, “To renew them again to repentance.”

Ἀνασταυροῦντας ἑαυτοῖς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ.³³ *Rursum crucifigentes sibi metipsis Filium Dei*.³⁴ Καὶ παραδειγματίζοντας. “*Et ostentui habentes*”³⁵ (Vulgate). “And making him a mockery” (Rhem.). “*Ludibrio habentes*”³⁶ (Erasmus). “*Ignominiae exponentes*”³⁷ (Beza). One of late, *Ad exemplum Judaeorum excruciant*, “Torment him as did the Jews.”

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good Word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, (for any) to renew them again to repentance; seeing they crucify again to themselves the Son of God, and put him to open shame (or treat him ignominiously).

22 Gk. “the powers of the age to come.”

23 Lat. “the powers of the future world.”

24 Syr. “strength, might, power.”

25 Lat. “the coming world.”

26 Lat. “about to be.”

27 Lat. “to come.”

28 Gk. “and have fallen.”

29 Lat. “and they are fallen.”

30 Lat. “if they be fallen.”

31 Syr. “and sin again.” The pointed text is אַשְׁמַרְתָּ אֶתְּחַוֶּה.

32 Gk. “to restore them again to repentance.”

33 Gk. “crucifying again to themselves the Son of God.”

34 Lat. “again crucifying to themselves the Son of God.”

35 Lat. “and making a display.”

36 Lat. “making him a mockery.”

37 Lat. “exposing him to shame or disgrace.”

That this passage in our apostle's discourse has been looked upon as accompanied with great difficulties is known to all, and many have the differences been about its interpretation; for both doctrinally and practically, sundry have here stumbled and miscarried. It is almost generally agreed upon that from these words, and the colorable but indeed perverse interpretation and application made of them by some in the primitive times, occasioned by the then present circumstances of things, to be mentioned afterward, the Latin church was so backward in receiving the epistle itself, that it had not absolutely prevailed therein in the days of Jerome, as we have elsewhere declared.³⁸ Wherefore it is necessary that we should a little inquire into the occasion of the great contests which have been in the church, almost in all ages, about the sense of this place.

HISTORICAL ERRORS IN INTERPRETING AND APPLYING HEBREWS 6:4-6

2. It is known that the primitive church, according to its duty, was carefully watchful about the holiness and upright walking of all that were admitted into the society and fellowship of it. Hence, upon every known and visible failing, they required an open repentance from the offenders before they would admit them unto a participation of the sacred mysteries. But upon flagitious and scandalous crimes, such as murder, adultery, or idolatry, in many churches they would never admit those who had been guilty of them into their communion anymore. Their greatest and most signal trial was with respect unto them who, through fear of death, complied with the Gentiles in their idolatrous worship in the time of persecution; for they had fixed no certain general rule whereby they should unanimously proceed, but every church exercised severity or lenity according as they saw cause, upon the circumstances of particular instances. Hence Cyprian,³⁹ in his banishment,

38 "The [Roman] church itself had not before the days of Jerome made any *public judgment* about the author or authority of this Epistle, not given and testimony unto them. . . . And yet all this while it was admitted and received by all other churches in the world, as Jerome testifies, and that from the days of the apostles." Owen, *Exercitations on the Epistle to the Hebrews. Also concerning the Messiah*, exerc. 1, sec. 15.

39 Cyprian (ca. 200-258) was bishop of the church in Carthage during the time of the Decian persecution prompted by an edict issued by the Roman emperor Decius requiring everyone in the empire to sacrifice to the gods or face torture or execution. After the persecution a schism emerged in the church in Carthage over how to handle Christians (the *lapsi*, i.e., the "fallen") who had offered pagan sacrifice (or obtained a certificate testifying they did so). Some, like Novatus of Carthage, held that all should be welcomed back in the church without penance;

would not positively determine concerning those of the church in Carthage who had so sinned and fallen, but deferred his thoughts until his return, when he resolved to advise with the whole church, and settle all things according to the counsel that should be agreed on among them. Yea, many of his epistles are on this subject peculiarly; and in them all, if compared together, it is evident that there was no rule agreed upon herein; nor was he himself well resolved in his own mind, though strictly on all occasions opposing Novatianus,⁴⁰ wherein it had been well if his arguments had answered his zeal. Before this, the Church of Rome was esteemed in particular more remiss in their discipline, and more free than other churches in their readmission unto communion of notorious offenders. Hence Tertullian,⁴¹ in his book *De poenitentia*, reflects on Zephyrinus,⁴² the bishop of Rome, that he had “admitted adulterers unto repentance, and thereby unto the communion of the church.”⁴³ But that church proceeding in her lenity, and every day enlarging

others, like Novatian of Rome (ca. 200–258), refused to receive back any of the *lapsi* into the church. Cyprian occupied a mediating position between these approaches, receiving lapsed Christians into the church only after public penance and allowing Christians who had actually performed pagan sacrifice to take communion only at the time of their death. See G. L. Bray, “Cyprian,” in Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 184; V. Saxer, “Cyprian of Carthage,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed., Angelo Di Berardino (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 1:646–49. For a modern translation of Cyprian’s works, see *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1886; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), vol. 5.

- ⁴⁰ Novatianus, or Novatian of Rome (ca. 200–258), was a Roman priest who set himself up as the rival of Pope Cornelius after his election in 251, charging Cornelius with being too lax in receiving Christians who lapsed under the Decian persecution (the *lapsi*). Christians whose confession of faith wavered under persecution, according to Novatian, should not be allowed back into the church. He was excommunicated in 251 for making himself pope in opposition to Pope Cornelius and later may have been martyred during persecutions under Emperor Valerian I (253–260). After Novatian’s death, the Novatian sect spread throughout Christian communities, applying Novatianism more radically, eventually denying penance to those who committed any sin deemed serious enough. A Roman synod eventually condemned Novatian and his followers as schismatics and heretics in 251. H. J. Vogt, “Novatian,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, 2:933–35; “Novatian,” *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, ed., E. John McClintock and James Strong (New York: Harper, 1894), 7:211–13.
- ⁴¹ Tertullian (ca. 160–230), often dubbed the father of Latin Christianity, was an early Christian author whose prolific writing included apologetic works against Christian Gnosticism and early theological writing on the doctrine of the Trinity. Later in his life he broke with Rome over his approach to ascetic rigor and joined the Montanists, a sect that believed in the continuance of prophetic gifts.
- ⁴² Zephyrinus (d. 217) was bishop of Rome from 199 to 217.
- ⁴³ It is in *De pudicitia* (*On Modesty*) where Tertullian complains of Zephyrinus’s edict that laxly seems to receive adulterers back into the church; Owen mistakenly cites *De poenitentia* (*On Repentance*). In the former, Tertullian remarks, “In fact—our good pontifex maximus, as the

her charity, Novatus⁴⁴ and Novatianus,⁴⁵ taking offense thereat,⁴⁶ advanced an opinion in the contrary extreme: for they denied all hope of church pardon or of a return unto ecclesiastical communion unto them who had fallen into open sin after baptism; and, in especial,⁴⁷ peremptorily excluded all persons whatsoever who had outwardly complied with idolatrous worship in time of persecution, without respect unto any distinguishing circumstances. Yea, they seem to have excluded them from all expectation of forgiveness from God himself.¶

But their followers, terrified with the uncharitableness and horror of this persuasion, tempered it so far, as leaving all persons absolutely to the mercy of God upon their repentance, they only denied such as we mentioned before a readmission into church communion, as Acesius speaks expressly in Socrates.⁴⁸ Now, this opinion they endeavored to confirm,

bishop of the bishops [i.e., Zephyrinus] solemnly declares: 'We do forgive even the cords of adultery and fornication.' I think it not possible to add to that decree: For the sake of all! And where will this generous pronouncement be made? I think at the same place—most probably placarded on the very doors of the dens of vice, below the very nameplates of the women." Tertullian, "*De Pudicitia*," ed. Robert Pearse, trans. by Gosta Claesson (1957) <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/>. For "On Repentance," see Tertullian, "On Repentance," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:657.

44 Novatus was a third-century deacon in Carthage (not to be confused with Novatian of Rome) and a contemporary of Cyprian, a bishop at Carthage. After the persecution of Christians under the Roman emperor Decian, many Christians escaped torture or execution by sacrificing to the Roman gods or by obtaining certificates proving that they did so. Some church authorities, such as Novatian of Rome and other rigorists, refused to readmit these fallen Christians (the *lapsi*) back into the church under any conditions. Others, like Novatus of Carthage, favored a laxer response, advocating the reception of the *lapsi* back into the church with no requirement of penance. Cyprian favored a moderate approach that allowed readmittance of the *lapsi* after a process of penance and repentance. Rebelling from Cyprian's authority, Novatus fled from Carthage to Rome, where he served the cause of Novatian, also an opponent of Cyprian, and was involved in making Novatian a bishop of a rival church in Rome. Romero Pose, "Novatus of Carthage," in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, 2:938; "Novatus of Carthage," *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 7:213–14.

45 That is, Novatian of Rome (ca. 200–258), who was the rival of Pope Cornelius at Rome and leader of a rigorist, schismatic group that did not grant forgiveness at all for grave sins in an attempt to form "a church which was holy and pure." Vogt, "Novatian," 934.

46 I.e., because of that; thereupon.

47 I.e., special.

48 In the text: lib. i. cap. 7.—Owen. Acesius was a Bishop of the Novatians who, though granting that God may forgive repentant Christians who lapsed from Christianity under pressure of persecution, refused to readmit them into the church. Socrates of Constantinople, or Socrates Scholasticus (ca. 380–ca. 450), was a church historian in the fifth century who wrote a work of early church history, *Historia ecclesiastica*. From this work, Owen cites a conversation between the Emperor Constantine and Acesius at the First Council of Nicaea in 325 (actually from chap. 10 of bk. 1, not chap. 7, as Owen has it): "When, therefore, the emperor further asked

as from the nature and use of baptism, which was not to be reiterated; whereon they judged that no pardon was to be granted unto them who fell into those sins which they lived in before, and were cleansed from at their baptism; so principally from this place of our apostle, wherein they thought their whole opinion was taught and confirmed. And so usually does it fall out very unhappily with men who think they clearly see some peculiar opinion or persuasion in some singular text of Scripture,⁴⁹ and will not bring their interpretation of it unto the analogy of faith, whereby

him, 'For what reason then do you separate yourself from communion with the rest of the Church?' he related what had taken place during the persecution under Decius; and referred to the rigidity of that austere canon which declares, that it is not right persons who after baptism have committed a sin, which the sacred Scriptures denominate 'a sin unto death' to be considered worthy of participation in the sacraments: that they should indeed be exhorted to repentance, but were not to expect remission from the priest, but from God, who is able and has authority to forgive sins. When Acesius had thus spoken, the emperor said to him, 'Place a ladder, Acesius, and climb alone into heaven.'" Socrates, *Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. A. C. Zenos, (New York: Christian Literature, 1890), 17.

⁴⁹ In the footnote: *Solenne est haereticis alicujus capituli ancipitis occasione adversus exercitum sententiarum Instrumenti totius armari. Tert. de Pudicit. Utique aequum, incerta de certis, obscura de manifestis praejudicari, ut ne inter discordiam certorum et incertorum, manifestorum et obscurorum, fides dissipetur. Id. de Resur.* "Ἀπαντα ὀρθὰ ἐνώπιον τῶν συνιέντων, φησὶ ἡ γραφή τουτέστι τῶν ὄσοι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ σαφηνεῖθαι τῶν γραφῶν ἐξήγησιν κατὰ τὸν ἐκκλησιαστικὸν κανόνα ἐκδεχόμενοι διασφύζουσι, κανὼν δὲ ἐκκλησιαστικὸς ἢ συμφῶν καὶ ἢ συμφωνία νόμου τε καὶ προφητῶν τῇ κατὰ [ed.: the original text omits "κατὰ"] τὴν τοῦ κυρίου παρουσίαν παραδιδομένη διαθήκη. Clem. Alex., *Stromat.* vi. Εὐ οἶδα ὅτι ῥήτα τινα παραλήπονται τῆς [ed.: the original text omits "τῆς"] γραφῆς οἱ καὶ ταῦτα βουλόμενοι τολμᾶν φάσκειν ἀπὸ Θεοῦ γεγόναι, μὴ δυνάμενοι ἐν ἕνφορ ἀποδείξει τῆς γραφῆς αἰτιωμένης μὲν τοὺς ἁμαρτάνοντας ἀποδεχομένης δὲ τοὺς εὖ πράττοντας, καὶ οὐδὲν ἦττον κάκεινα λεγοῦσης ἅτινα περισπᾶν δοκεῖ ὀλίγα ὄντα τοὺς ἁμαθῶς τὰ θεῖα γράμματα ἀναγινώσκοντας. Origen. *adv. Cels.* lib. vi.—Owen.

English translations: "But this is the usual way with perverse and ignorant heretics: to arm themselves with the opportune support of some one ambiguous passage." Tertullian, *On Modesty*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:74.

"It cannot but be right . . . that uncertain statements should be determined by certain ones . . . else there is fear that, in the conflict of certainties and uncertainties, of explicitness and obscurity, faith may be shattered." Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:545.

"But all things are right,' says the Scripture, 'before those who understand,' that is, 'those who receive and observe, according to the ecclesiastical rule, the exposition of the Scriptures explained by Him; and the ecclesiastical rule is the concord and harmony of the law and the prophets in the covenant delivered at the coming of the Lord.'" Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:299.

"I am well aware that those who would daringly assert that these evils were created by God will quote certain expressions of Scripture (in their support), because we are not able to show one consistent series of passages; for although Scripture (generally) blames the wicked and approves of the righteous, it nevertheless contains some statements which, although comparatively few

they might see how contrary it is to the whole design and current of the word in other places. But the Church of Rome on the other side judging rightly from other directions given in the Scripture, that the Novatians transgressed the rule of charity and gospel discipline in their severities, yet as it should seem, and is very probable, knew not how to answer the objection from this place of our apostle. Therefore did they rather choose for a season to suspend their assent unto the authority of the whole epistle than to prejudice the church by its admission. And well was it that some learned men afterward by their sober interpretations of the words, plainly evinced⁵⁰ that no countenance was given in them unto the errors of the Novatians; for without this it is much to be feared that some would have preferred their interest in their present controversy before the authority of it, which would in the issue have proved ruinous to the truth itself. For the epistle, being designed of God unto the common edification of the church, would have at length prevailed, whatever sense men through their prejudices and ignorance should put upon any passages of it. But this controversy is long since buried, the generality of the churches in the world being sufficiently remote from that which was truly the mistake of the Novatians; yea, the most of them do bear peaceably in their communion, without the least exercise of gospel discipline toward them, such persons as concerning whom the dispute was of old, whether they should ever in this world be admitted into the communion of the church, although upon their open and professed repentance. We shall not therefore at present need to labor in this controversy.

But the sense of these words has been the subject of great contests on other occasions also. For some do suppose and contend that they are real and true believers who are deciphered by the apostle, and that their character is given us in and by sundry inseparable adjuncts and properties of such persons. Hence, they conclude that such believers may totally and finally fall from grace, and perish eternally. Yea, it is evident that this hypothesis of the final apostasy of true believers is that which influences their minds and judgments to suppose that such are here intended. Wherefore others who will not admit that, according to the tenor of the covenant of grace in Christ Jesus, true believers can perish everlastingly, do say that either they are not here intended, or if they are, that the words are only comminatory,⁵¹ wherein,

in number, seem to disturb the minds of ignorant readers of holy Scripture.” Origen, *Origen against Celsus*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:395.

⁵⁰ I.e., indicated.

⁵¹ I.e., pertaining to warning or denunciation.

although the consequence⁵² in them in a way of arguing be true, namely that on the supposition⁵³ laid down the inference⁵⁴ is certain, yet the supposition is not asserted in order unto a certain consequent,⁵⁵ whence it should follow that true believers might so really fall away and absolutely perish. And these things have been the matter of many contests among learned men.

Again, there have been sundry mistakes in the practical application of the intention of these words unto the consciences of men, mostly made by themselves who are concerned; for whereas, by reason of sin, they have been surprised with terrors and troubles of conscience, they have withal,⁵⁶ in their darkness and distress, supposed themselves to be fallen into the condition here described by our apostle, and consequently to be irrecoverably lost. And these apprehensions usually befall men on two occasions; for some having been overtaken with some great actual sin against the second table,⁵⁷ after they have made a profession of the gospel, and having their consciences harassed with a sense of their guilt (as it will fall out where men are not greatly hardened through the deceitfulness of sin), they judge that they are fallen under the sentence denounced in this Scripture against such sinners, as they suppose themselves to be, whereby their state is irrecoverable. Others do make the same judgment of themselves, because they have fallen from that constant compliance with their convictions, which formerly led them unto a strict performance of duties, and this in some course of long continuance.

Now, whereas it is certain that the apostle in this discourse gives no countenance unto that severity of the Novatians, whereby they excluded offenders everlastingly from the peace and communion of the church; nor to the final apostasy of true believers, which he testifies against in this very chapter, in compliance with innumerable other testimonies of Scripture to the same purpose; nor does he teach anything whereby the conscience of any sinner who desires to return to God and to find acceptance with him should be discouraged or disheartened; we must attend unto the exposition of the words in the first place, so as not to break in upon the boundaries of other truths, nor transgress against the analogy of faith. And we shall find that this whole

52 I.e., an inference determined through logic.

53 I.e., presupposition; thesis; hypothesis.

54 I.e., conclusion derived through logic.

55 I.e., statement that logically follows; second clause (the “then” clause) in a conditional statement, following the “if” clause (for example, the phrase “they are true believers” in the sentence, “If they persevere, they are true believers”).

56 I.e., nevertheless.

57 I.e., second table of the Ten Commandments. Cf. Ex. 20:12–17; Deut. 5:16–21.

discourse, compared with other scriptures, and freed from the prejudices that men have brought unto it, is both remote from administering any just occasion to the mistakes before mentioned, and is a needful, wholesome commination,⁵⁸ duly to be considered by all professors of the gospel.

In the words we consider, 1.⁵⁹ the connection of them unto those foregoing, intimating the occasion of the introduction of this whole discourse. 2. The subject described in them, or the persons spoken of, under sundry qualifications, which may be inquired into, jointly and severally. 3. What is supposed concerning them. 4. What is affirmed of them on that supposition.

THE CONTEXT OF HEBREWS 6:4-6

3.⁶⁰ The connection of the words is included in the causal conjunction, γάρ, “for.” It respects the introduction of a reason for what had been before discoursed, as also of the limitation which the apostle added expressly unto his purpose of making a progress in their farther instruction, “if God permit.”⁶¹ And he does not herein express his judgment that they to whom he wrote were such as he describes, for he afterward declares that he “hoped better things” concerning them; only, it was necessary to give them this caution, that they might take due care not to be such. And whereas he had manifested that they were slow as to the making of a progress in knowledge and a suitable practice, he lets them here know the danger that there was in continuing in that slothful condition. For not to proceed in the ways of the gospel and obedience thereunto is an untoward⁶² entrance into a total relinquishment of the one and the other. That therefore they might be acquainted with the danger hereof, and be stirred up to avoid that danger, he gives them an account of the miserable condition of those who, after a profession of the gospel, beginning at a nonproficiency⁶³ under it, do end in apostasy from it. And we may see that the severest comminations are

58 I.e., public censure, denunciation, or condemnation (as against sin); threat of punishment or vengeance, especially against sinners.

59 This numbering may appear to be incorrect (in that numbers 1-4 here correspond with numbers 3-6 below). It is correct, though, because Owen continues with the numbering that he had started the chapter with.

60 Number 3 here corresponds to number 1 above: “1. The connection of [the words of Heb. 6:4] unto those foregoing,” that is, the context of the passage.

61 Heb. 6:3.

62 I.e., willfully contrary; perverse.

63 I.e., failure to make progress or improve (e.g., failure to make progress under the teaching of the gospel).

not only useful in the preaching of the gospel, but exceeding necessary, toward persons that are observed to be slothful in their profession.

THE PRIVILEGES THE APOSTATES ENJOYED

4.⁶⁴ The description of the persons that are the subject spoken of is given in five instances of the evangelical privileges whereof they were made partakers, notwithstanding all which, and against their obliging efficacy⁶⁵ to the contrary, it is supposed that they may wholly desert the gospel itself. And some things we may observe concerning this description of them in general. As, (1) the apostle, designing to express the fearful state and judgment of these persons, describes them by such things as may fully evidence it to be, as unavoidable, so righteous and equal. Those things must be some eminent privileges and advantages, whereof they were made partakers by the gospel. These, being despised in their apostasy, do proclaim their destruction from God to be rightly deserved. (2) That all these privileges do consist in certain especial operations of the Holy Ghost, which were peculiar unto the dispensation of the gospel, such as they neither were nor could be made partakers of in their Judaism. For the Spirit in this sense was not received by “the works of the law, but by the hearing of faith” (Gal. 3:2). And this was a testimony unto them that they were delivered from the bondage of the law, namely by a participation of that Spirit which was the great privilege of the gospel. (3) Here is no express mention of any covenant grace or mercy in them or toward them, nor of any duty of faith or obedience which they had performed. Nothing of justification, sanctification, or adoption, is expressly assigned unto them. Afterward, when he comes to declare his hope and persuasion concerning these Hebrews, that they were not such as those whom he had before described, nor such as would so fall away unto perdition, he does it upon three grounds, whereon they were differenced from them. As, [1] that they had such things as did accompany salvation, that is, such as salvation is inseparable from. None of these things, therefore, had he ascribed unto those whom he describes in this place; for if he had so done, they would not have been unto him an argument and evidence of a contrary end, that these should not fall away and perish as well as those. Wherefore he ascribes nothing to these here in the text that does peculiarly “accompany salvation” (Heb. 6:9). [2] He describes them by their duties of obedience and fruits of faith. This was their “work

⁶⁴ Number 4 here corresponds to number 2 above: “The subject described . . . or the persons spoken of.”

⁶⁵ I.e., ability to produce a desired effect.

and labour of love” toward the name of God (v. 10). And hereby also does he difference them from these in the text, concerning whom he supposes that they may perish eternally, which these fruits of saving faith and sincere love cannot do. [3] He adds, that in the preservation of those there mentioned, the faithfulness of God was concerned: “God is not unrighteous to forget.”⁶⁶ For they were such (he intended) as were interested in the covenant of grace, with respect whereunto alone there is any engagement on the faithfulness or righteousness of God to preserve men from apostasy and ruin; and there is so with an equal respect unto all who are so taken into that covenant. But of these in the text he supposes no such thing, and thereupon does not intimate that either the righteousness or faithfulness of God was any way engaged for their preservation, but rather the contrary. This whole description, therefore, refers unto some especial gospel privileges, which professors in those days were promiscuously made partakers of, and what they were in particular we must in the next place inquire.

The Apostates Were Once Enlightened, Not Merely Baptized

(1) The first thing in the description is, that they were ἅπαξ φωτισθέντες, “once enlightened.” Says the Syriac translation, as we observed, “once baptized.” It is very certain that, early in the church, baptism was called φωτισμός, “illumination”; and φωτίζειν, to “enlighten,” was used for to “baptize.” And the set times wherein they solemnly administered that ordinance were called ἡμέραι τῶν φώτων, “the days of light.” Hereunto the Syriac interpreter seems to have had respect; and the word ἅπαξ, “once,” may give countenance hereunto. Baptism was once only to be celebrated, according to the constant faith of the church in all ages. And they called baptism “illumination,” because it being one ordinance of the initiation of persons into a participation of all the mysteries of the church, they were thereby translated out of the kingdom of darkness into that of light and grace.⁶⁷ And it seems to give farther countenance hereunto in that baptism really was the beginning and foundation of a participation of all the other

⁶⁶ Heb. 6:10.

⁶⁷ Justin Martyr (ca. 105–ca. 165) “described baptism as a rebirth in water, and then as an ‘enlightenment’, a technical term for baptism by the fourth century.” R. F. G. Burnish, “Baptism,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, 71. In Justin’s writings, “forgiveness of sins and rebirth are both associated with baptism in the threefold name, and this baptism appears to play an instrumental role in the conveying of these divine gifts; baptism is also termed a washing and an enlightenment.” Geoffrey Wainwright, “Baptism, Baptismal Rites,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 121.

spiritual privileges that are mentioned afterward. For it was usual in those times, that, upon the baptizing of persons, the Holy Ghost came upon them, and endowed them with extraordinary gifts, peculiar to the days of the gospel, as we have showed in our consideration of the order between baptism and imposition of hands. And this opinion has so much of probability in it, that, having nothing therewithal unsuited unto the analogy of faith, or design of the place, I should embrace it, if the word itself, as here used, did not require another interpretation. For it was a good while after the writing of this epistle, and all other parts of the New Testament, at least an age or two, if not more, before this word was used mystically to express baptism. In the whole Scripture it has another sense, denoting an inward operation of the Spirit, and not the outward administration of an ordinance. And it is too much boldness to take a word in a peculiar sense in one single place, diverse from its proper signification and constant use, if there be no circumstances in the text forcing us thereunto, as here are not. And for the word ἅπαξ, “once,” it is not to be restrained unto this particular, but refers equally unto all the instances that follow, signifying no more but that those mentioned were really and truly partakers of them.

Φωτίζομαι⁶⁸ is to give light or knowledge by teaching, the same with הורה,⁶⁹ which is therefore so translated oftentimes by the Greeks; as by Aquila (Ex. 4:12; Ps. 119:33; Prov. 4:4; Isa. 27:11), as Drusus observes. And it is so by the LXX⁷⁰ (Judg. 13:8; 2 Kings 12:2; 17:27). Our apostle uses it for to “make manifest,” that is, “bring to light” (1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Tim. 1:10). And the meaning of it (John 1:9) where we render it “lighteth,” is to teach. And φωτισμὸς is knowledge upon instruction: εἰς τὸ μὴ αὐγάσαι αὐτοῖς τὸν φωτισμὸν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, “That the light of the gospel should not shine into them” (2 Cor. 4:4); that is, the knowledge of it; so verse 6: πρὸς φωτισμὸν τῆς γνώσεως, “The light of the knowledge” (2 Cor. 4:6). Wherefore, to be “enlightened” in this place is to be instructed in the doctrine of the gospel, so as to have a spiritual apprehension thereof. And this is so termed on a double account:

[1] Of the object, or the things known or apprehended. For “life and immortality are brought to light by the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). Hence it is called light. “The inheritance of the saints in light.” And the state which men are thereby brought into is so called in opposition to the darkness that is in the world without it (1 Pet. 2:9). The world without the gospel

⁶⁸ Gk. (from φωτίζω) “to enlighten, illuminate; to instruct, teach.”

⁶⁹ Heb. (from the hiphil of ירה) “to teach, instruct.”

⁷⁰ This is a common abbreviation for the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, translated in the third century BC in Alexandria, Egypt.

is the kingdom of Satan: “the whole world has been put under the evil one”⁷¹ (1 John 5:19). The whole of the world, and all that belongs unto it, in distinction from and opposition unto the new creation, is under the power of the wicked one, the prince of the power of darkness, and so is full of darkness. It is τόπος ἀγχμηρός, “a dark place” (2 Pet. 1:19), wherein ignorance, folly, errors, and superstition do dwell and reign. By the power and efficacy of this darkness are men kept at a distance from God, and know not whither they go. This is called “walking in darkness” (1 John 1:6), whereunto “walking in the light,” that is, the knowledge of God in Christ by the gospel, is opposed (1 John 1:7). On this account is our instruction in the knowledge of the gospel called “illumination,” because itself is light.

[2] On the account of the subject, or the mind itself, whereby the gospel is apprehended. For the knowledge which is received thereby expels that darkness, ignorance, and confusion which the mind before was filled and possessed withal. The knowledge, I say, of the doctrines of the gospel concerning the person of Christ, of God’s being in him reconciling the world to himself, of his offices, work, and mediation, and the like heads of divine revelation, does set up a spiritual light in the minds of men, enabling them to discern what before was utterly hid from them, while alienated from the life of God through their ignorance. Of this light and knowledge there are several degrees, according to the means of instruction which men do enjoy, the capacity they have to receive it, and the diligence they use to that purpose; but a competent measure of the knowledge of the fundamental and most material principles or doctrines of the gospel is required unto all that may thence be said to be illuminated; that is, freed from the darkness and ignorance they once lived in (2 Pet. 1:19–21).

This is the first property whereby the persons intended are described; they are such as were illuminated by the instruction they had received in the doctrine of the gospel, and the impression made thereby on their minds by the Holy Ghost; for this is a common work of his, and is here so reckoned. And the apostle would have us know that

- {1} It is a great mercy, a great privilege, to be enlightened with the doctrine of the gospel by the effectual working of the Holy Ghost. But,
- {2} It is such a privilege as may be lost, and end in the aggravation of the sin, and condemnation of those who were made partakers of it. And,

⁷¹ In the text: ὁ κόσμος ὅλος ἐν τῷ πονηρῷ κείται.—Owen.

{3} Where there is a total neglect of the due improvement of this privilege and mercy, the condition of such persons is hazardous, as inclining towards apostasy.

[3] Thus much lies open and manifest in the text. But that we may more particularly discover the nature of this first part of the character of apostates, for their sakes who may look after their own concernment therein, we may yet a little more distinctly express the nature of that illumination and knowledge which is here ascribed unto them; and how it is lost in apostasy will afterward appear. And,

{1} There is a knowledge of spiritual things that is purely natural and disciplinary, attainable and attained without any especial aid or assistance of the Holy Ghost. As this is evident in common experience, so especially among such as casting themselves on the study of spiritual things, are yet utter strangers unto all spiritual gifts. Some knowledge of the Scripture and the things contained in it is attainable at the same rate of pains and study with that of any other art or science.

{2} The illumination intended, being a gift of the Holy Ghost, differs from and is exalted above this knowledge that is purely natural. For it makes nearer approaches unto the light of spiritual things in their own nature than the other does. Notwithstanding the utmost improvement of scientific notions that are purely natural, the things of the gospel in their own nature are not only unsuited unto the wills and affections of persons endued with them, but are really foolishness unto their minds. And as unto that goodness and excellency which give desirableness unto spiritual things, this knowledge discovers so little of them that most men hate the things which they profess to believe. But this spiritual illumination gives the mind some satisfaction with delight and joy in the things that are known. By that beam whereby it shines into darkness, although it be not fully comprehended, yet it represents the way of the gospel as a way of “righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:21), which reflects a peculiar regard of it on the mind.

Moreover, the knowledge that is merely natural has little or no power upon the soul, either to keep it from sin or to constrain it to obedience. There is not a more secure and profligate⁷² generation of sinners in the world than those who are under the sole conduct of it. But the illumination here intended is attended with efficacy, so as that it does effectually press in the conscience and whole soul unto an abstinence from sin and the performance of all known duties. Hence persons under the power of it and its convictions do oftentimes walk blamelessly and uprightly in the world, so as not with the

72 I.e., shamelessly and wildly immoral, extravagant, or licentious.

other to contribute unto the contempt of Christianity. Besides, there is such an alliance between spiritual gifts, that where any one of them does reside, it has assuredly others accompanying of it, or one way or other belonging unto its train, as is manifest in this place. Even a single talent is made up of many pounds. But the light and knowledge which is of a mere natural acquirement, is solitary, destitute of the society and countenance of any spiritual gift whatever. And these things are exemplified unto common observation every day.

{3} There is a saving, sanctifying light and knowledge, which this spiritual illumination rises not up unto; for, though it transiently affects the mind with some glances of the beauty, glory, and excellency of spiritual things, yet it does not give that direct, steady, intuitive insight into them which is obtained by grace (see 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4, 6). Neither does it renew, change, or transform the soul into a conformity unto the things known, by planting of them in the will and affections, as a gracious, saving light does (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 6:17; 12:1).

These things I judged necessary to be added, to clear the nature of the first character of apostates.

The Apostates Had Tasted of the Heavenly Gift

(2) The second thing asserted in the description of them is, “that they have tasted of the heavenly gift”; γευσάμενους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου. The doubling of the article gives emphasis to the expression. And we must inquire, [1] what is meant by the “heavenly gift”; and, [2] what by “tasting” of it.

The Meaning of “Heavenly Gift”

[1] The gift of God, δωρεᾶ,⁷³ is either δόσις,⁷⁴ *donatio*,⁷⁵ or δῶρημα,⁷⁶ *donum*.⁷⁷ Sometimes it is taken for the grant or giving itself, and sometimes for the thing given. In the first sense it is used, “Thanks be unto God,” ἐπὶ τῇ ἀνεκδιηγῆτῶ αὐτοῦ δωρεᾷ, “for his gift that cannot be declared” (2 Cor. 9:15); that is, fully or sufficiently. Now this gift was his grant of a free, charitable, and bountiful spirit to the Corinthians, in ministering unto the poor saints. The grant hereof is called “God’s gift.” So is the gift of Christ used also: “According to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Eph. 4:7); that is, according as he is pleased to give and grant of the fruits of the Spirit unto men (see Rom. 5:15, 17; Eph. 3:7). Sometimes it is taken for the thing given,

73 Gk. “a gift, present.”

74 Gk. “a giving.”

75 Lat. “a presenting, a donation.”

76 Gk. “that which is given; a present, a gift.”

77 Lat. “gift, present, offering.”

properly δῶρον⁷⁸ or δῶρημα (as James 1:17). So it is used, “If thou knewest the gift of God,” τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ θεοῦ (John 4:10), “the gift of God,” that is, the “thing given” by him, or to be given by him. It is, as many judge, the person of Christ himself in that place, which is intended. But the context makes it plain, that it is the Holy Ghost; for he is that “living water” which the Lord Jesus in that place promises to bestow.⁷⁹ And so far as I can observe, δωρεὰ, the “gift,” with respect unto God as denoting the thing given, is nowhere used but only to signify the Holy Ghost; and if it be so, the sense of this place is determined, “Ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost,” τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος (Acts 2:38); not that which he gives, but that which he is. “Thou hast thought that the gift of God,” δωρεὰν τοῦ θεοῦ, “may be purchased with money” (Acts 8:20); that is, the power of the Holy Ghost in miraculous operations. So expressly Acts 10:45; 11:17. Elsewhere δωρεά, so far as I can observe, when respecting God, does not signify the thing given, but the grant itself. The Holy Spirit is signally⁸⁰ the gift of God under the New Testament.

And he is said to be ἐπουράνιος, “heavenly,” or from heaven. This may have respect unto his work and effect; they are “heavenly,” as opposed to carnal and earthly. But principally it regards his mission by Christ after his ascension into heaven, “Being exalted and having received the promise of the Father, he sent the Spirit” (Acts 2:33). The promise of him was, that he should be sent from heaven, or למעלה, “from above,” as God is said to be above, which is the same with “heavenly” (Deut. 4:39; 2 Chron. 6:23; Job 31:2, 28; Isa. 2:2, 15, מן־הַמַּלְאָכִים, and Isa. 45:8⁸¹). When he came upon the Lord Christ to anoint him for his work, “the heavens were opened,” and he came from above (Matt. 3:16). So, at his first coming on the apostles, there came a “sound from heaven” (Acts 2:2). Hence he is said to be ἀποσταλείς ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ,⁸² that is, to be ἡ δωρεὰ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἡ ἐπουράνιος,⁸³ “sent from heaven” (1 Pet. 1:12). Wherefore, although he may be said to be “heavenly” upon other accounts also, which therefore

⁷⁸ Gk. “gift.”

⁷⁹ John 7:37–39.

⁸⁰ I.e., particularly; especially; notably.

⁸¹ Some of Owen’s original verse citations do not contain the phrase למעלה, “from above.” Isaiah 2:2, 15 neither contains the phrase למעלה, “from above” nor מן־הַמַּלְאָכִים, “from on high.” Isaiah 45:8 does contain “from above.”

⁸² Gk. “sent from heaven.”

⁸³ This Greek phrase, “the gift of God, [which is] from heaven” (ἡ δωρεὰ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἡ ἐπουράνιος) is not found in 1 Peter 1:12 or in Hebrews 6:4. 1 Peter 1:12 says “ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ ἀποσταλέντι ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ [from the Holy Spirit sent from heaven],” and Hebrews 6:4 says “τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου [the heavenly gift].”

are not absolutely to be excluded, yet his being sent from heaven by Christ, after his ascension thither⁸⁴ and exaltation there, is principally here regarded. He therefore is this ἡ δωρεὰ ἡ ἐπουράνιος, the “heavenly gift” here intended, though not absolutely, but with respect unto an especial work.

That which riseth up against this interpretation is, that the Holy Ghost is expressly mentioned in the next clause: “And were made partakers of the Holy Ghost.” It is not therefore probable that he should be here also intended.

Answ. {1} It is ordinary to have the same thing twice expressed in various words, to quicken⁸⁵ the sense of them; and it is necessary it should be so, when there are divers respects unto the same thing, as there are in this place.

{2} The following clause may be exegetical of this, declaring more fully and plainly what is here intended, which is usual also in the Scripture; so that nothing is cogent from this consideration, to disprove an interpretation so suited to the sense of the place, and which the constant use of the word makes necessary to be embraced. But,

{3} The Holy Ghost is here mentioned as the great gift of the gospel times, as coming down from heaven, not absolutely, not as unto his person, but with respect unto an especial work; namely, the change of the whole state of religious worship in the church of God; whereas we shall see in the next words, he is spoken of only with respect unto external actual operations. But he was the great, the promised heavenly gift, to be bestowed under the New Testament, by whom God would institute and ordain a new way, and new rites of worship, upon the revelation of himself and his will in Christ. Unto him was committed the reformation of all things in the church, whose time was now come (Heb. 9:10). The Lord Christ, when he ascended into heaven, left all things standing and continuing in religious worship, as they had done from the days of Moses, though he had virtually put an end unto it. And he commanded his disciples, that they should attempt no alteration therein, until the Holy Ghost were sent from heaven to enable them thereunto (Acts 1:4–5). But when he came as the great gift of God, promised under the New Testament, he removes all the carnal worship and ordinances of Moses, and that by the full revelation of the accomplishment of all that was signified by them, and appoints the new, holy, spiritual worship of the gospel, that was to succeed in their room.¶

The Spirit of God, therefore, as bestowed for the introduction of the new gospel state, in truth and worship, is the “heavenly gift” here intended. Thus

84 I.e., to that place.

85 I.e., enliven.

our apostle warns these Hebrews that they “turn not away from him who speaketh from heaven” (Heb. 12:25), that is, Jesus Christ speaking in the dispensation of the gospel by the “Holy Ghost sent from heaven.”⁸⁶ And there is an antithesis included herein, between the law and the gospel; the former being given on earth, the latter being immediately from heaven. God, in giving of the law, made use of the ministry of angels,⁸⁷ and that on the earth; but he gave the gospel church state, by that Spirit which, although he works in men on earth, and is said in every act or work to be sent from heaven, yet is he still in heaven, and always speaks from thence; as our Savior said of himself, with respect unto his divine nature (John 3:13).

The Meaning of “Tasting” the Heavenly Gift

[2] Secondly, we may inquire what it is to “taste” of this heavenly gift. The expression of “tasting” is metaphorical, and signifies no more but to make a trial or experiment; for so we do by tasting, naturally and properly of that which is tendered unto us to eat. We taste such things by the sense given us to discern our food, and then either receive or refuse them as we find occasion. It does not therefore include eating, much less digestion and turning into nourishment of what is so tasted. For its nature being only thereby discerned, it may be refused, yea, though we like its relish and savor upon some other consideration. Some have observed, that to taste is as much as to eat; as, “I will not taste bread, or ought else” (2 Sam. 3:35). But the meaning is, “I will not so much as taste it,” whence it was impossible he should eat it. And when Jonathan says that he only tasted a little of the honey (1 Sam. 14:29), it was an excuse and extenuation⁸⁸ of what he had done. But it is unquestionably used for some kind of experience of the nature of things: טעמה טוב סחרה,⁸⁹ “She tasteth that her merchandise is good” (Prov. 31:18); or has experience of it, from its increase, “O taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps. 34:8); which Peter respects, “If so be that ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious” (1 Pet. 2:3); or found it so by experience. It is therefore properly to make an experiment or trial of anything, whether it be received or refused; and is sometimes opposed to eating and digestion (as Matt. 27:34).¶

That, therefore, which is ascribed unto these persons is, that they had had an experience of the power of the Holy Ghost, that gift of God, in the

⁸⁶ 1 Pet. 1:12.

⁸⁷ Acts 7:53; Heb. 2:2.

⁸⁸ I.e., making light.

⁸⁹ *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* reads, טעמה כִּי טוֹב סַחְרָה. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983).

dispensation of the gospel, the revelation of the truth, and institution of the spiritual worship of it. Of this state, and of the excellency of it, they had made some trial, and had some experience; a privilege that all men were not made partakers of. And by this taste they were convinced that it was far more excellent than what they had been before accustomed unto, although now they had a mind to leave the finest wheat for their old acorns. Wherefore, although tasting contains a diminution in⁹⁰ it, if compared with that spiritual eating and drinking, with that digestion of gospel truths, turning them into nourishment, which are in true believers, yet, absolutely considered, it denotes that apprehension and experience of the excellency of the gospel as administered by the Spirit, which is a great privilege and spiritual advantage, the contempt whereof will prove an unspeakable aggravation of the sin, and the remediless ruin of apostates. The meaning then of this character given concerning these apostates is, that they had some experience of the power and efficacy of the Holy Spirit from heaven, in gospel administrations and worship. For what some say of faith, it has here no place; and what others affirm of Christ, and his being the gift of God, comes in the issue unto what we have proposed. And we may observe, further to clear the design of the apostle in this commination:

- {1} That all the gifts of God under the gospel are peculiarly heavenly (John 3:12; Eph. 1:3) and that in opposition, 1st, to earthly things (Col. 3:11, 12);⁹¹ 2nd, to carnal ordinances (Heb. 9:23). Let them beware by whom they are despised.
- {2} The Holy Ghost, for the revelation of the mysteries of the gospel, and the institution of the ordinances of spiritual worship, is the great gift of God under the New Testament.
- {3} There is a goodness and excellency in this heavenly gift, which may be tasted or experienced in some measure by such as never receive them, in their life, power, and efficacy. They may taste, 1st, of the word, in its truth, not its power; 2nd, of the worship of the church, in its outward order, not in its inward beauty; 3rd, of the gifts of the church, not its graces.
- {4} A rejection of the gospel, its truth and worship, after some experience had of their worth and excellency, is a high aggravation of sin, and a certain presage⁹² of destruction.

⁹⁰ I.e., diminishing, lessening, or reducing of.

⁹¹ The correct reference is Col. 3:1–2.

⁹² I.e., feeling; belief; sign.

The Apostates Were Made Partakers of the Holy Ghost

(3) The third property whereby these persons are described is added in those words; καὶ μετόχους γενηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου; “And were made partakers of the Holy Ghost.” This is placed in the middle or center of the privileges enumerated, two preceding it, and two following after; as that which is the root and animating principle of them all. They all are effects of the Holy Ghost, in his gifts or his graces, and so do depend on the participation of him. Now men do so partake of the Holy Ghost, as they do receive him. And he may be received either as unto personal inhabitation, or as unto spiritual operations. In the first way, “the world cannot receive him” (John 14:17), where the world is opposed unto true believers, and therefore, those here intended were not in that sense partakers of him. His operations respect his gifts. So to partake of him, is to have a part, share, or portion in what he distributes by way of spiritual gifts; in answer unto that expression, “All these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit, dividing unto every one severally as he will” (1 Cor. 12:11). So Peter told Simon the magician, that he had no part in spiritual gifts; he was not partaker of the Holy Ghost (Acts 8:21). Wherefore, to be partaker of the Holy Ghost, is to have a share in, and benefit of his spiritual operations.

But, whereas the other things mentioned are also gifts or operations of the Holy Ghost, on what ground or for what reason is this mentioned here in particular, that they were “made partakers of him,” which if his operations only be intended, seems to be expressed in the other instances?

Answer [1] It is, as we observed before, no unusual thing in the Scripture, to express the same thing under various notions, the more effectually to impress a consideration and sense of it on our mind; especially where an expression has a singular emphasis in it, as this has here used: for, it is an exceeding aggravation of the sins of those apostates, that in these things they were partakers of the Holy Ghost.

[2] As was before intimated also, this participation of the Holy Ghost, is placed, it may be, in the midst of the several parts of this description, as that whereon they do all depend, and they are all but instances of it. They were partakers of the Holy Ghost in that they were “once enlightened,” and so of the rest.

[3] It expresses their own personal interest in these things. They had an interest in the things mentioned not only objectively, as they were proposed and presented to them in the church; but subjectively they themselves in their own persons were made partakers of them. It is one thing for a man to have

a share in, and benefit by the gifts of the church, another to be personally himself endowed with them.

[4] To mind them in an especial manner of the privilege they enjoyed under the gospel, above what they had in their Judaism. For, whereas they had not then so much as heard that there was a Holy Ghost, that is, a blessed dispensation of him in spiritual gifts (Acts 19:2); now they themselves in their own persons were made partakers of him, than which there could be no greater aggravation of their apostasy: And we may observe in our way, that,

The Holy Ghost is present with many as unto powerful operations, with whom he is not present as to gracious inhabitation; or, many are made partakers of him in his spiritual gifts, who are never made partakers of him in his saving graces (Matt. 7:22–23).

The Apostates Had Tasted the Goodness of the Word of God

(4) Fourthly, it is added in the description, that they had tasted καλὸν θεοῦ ρῆμα, “the good Word of God.” And we must inquire, [1] what is meant by the “Word of God”; [2] how it is said to be “good”; and [3] in what sense they “taste” of it.

[1] Πῆμα⁹³ is properly *verbum dictum*, a “word spoken”; and although it be sometimes used in another sense by our apostle, and by him alone (Heb. 1:3; 11:3), where it denotes the effectual active power of God; yet both the signification of the word, and its principal use elsewhere, denote words spoken; and, when applied unto God, his word as preached and declared (see Rom. 10:17; John 6:68). The word of God, that is, the word of the gospel as preached is that which they thus tasted of. But it may be said, that they enjoyed the word of God in their state of Judaism: they did so, as to the written word, for unto them were “committed the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2). But it is the word of God as preached in the dispensation of the gospel that is eminently thus called, and concerning which such excellent things are spoken (Rom. 1:16; Acts 20:32; James 1:21).

[2] This word is said to be καλὸν, “good,” desirable, amiable, as the word here used signifies. Wherein it is so, we shall see immediately. But whereas the word of God preached under the dispensation of the gospel, may be considered two ways; {1} in general, as to the whole system of truths contained therein; and, {2} in especial, for the declaration made of the accomplishment of the promise in sending Jesus Christ for the redemption of the church; it

⁹³ Gk. “a (spoken) word.”

is here especially intended in this latter sense. This is emphatically called *ῥῆμα κυρίου*⁹⁴ (1 Pet. 1:25). So the promise of God in particular is called “his good word”: “After seventy years I will visit you, and perform my good word towards you” (Jer. 29:10); as he calls it the “good thing” that he had promised (Jer. 33:14). The gospel is the good tidings of peace and salvation by Jesus Christ (Isa. 52:7).

[3] Hereof they are said to “taste,” as they were before of the “heavenly gift.” The apostle as it were studiously keeps himself to this expression, on purpose to manifest that he intends not those who by faith do really receive, feed, and live on Jesus Christ, as tendered in the word of the gospel (John 6:35, 49–51, 54–55). It is as if he had said, I speak not of those who have received and digested the spiritual food of their souls, and turned it into spiritual nourishment, but of such as have so far “tasted” of it, as that they ought to have desired it as “sincere milk,” to have grown thereby; but they had received such an experiment of its divine truth and power, as that it had various effects upon them. And for the further explication of these words, and therein of the description of the state of these supposed apostates, we may consider the ensuing observations, which declare the sense of the words, or what is contained in them.

- {1} There is a goodness and excellency in the word of God able to attract and affect the minds of men, who yet never arrive at sincere obedience unto it.
- {2} There is an especial goodness in the word of the promise, concerning Jesus Christ, and the declaration of its accomplishment.

What Does the “Goodness” Refer To?

[4] For the first of these propositions, we may inquire what is that goodness, and wherein it does consist; as also how apostatizing backsliders may “taste” thereof; which things tend to the explanation of the words, and what is designed by the apostle in them.

{1} This goodness and excellency of the word of God consists in its spiritual, heavenly truth. All truth is beautiful and desirable; the perfection of the minds of men consists in the reception of it and conformity unto it. And although “true” be one consideration of anything and “good” another, yet they are inseparable properties of the same subject. Whatever is true is also good. So are these things put together by the apostle (Phil. 4:8). And

⁹⁴ Gk. “the word of the Lord.”

as truth is good in itself, so is it in its effects on the minds of men; it gives them peace, satisfaction, and contentment. Darkness, errors, falsehood, are evils in themselves, and fill the minds of men with variety, uncertainty, superstition, dread and bondage. It is truth that makes the soul free in any kind (John 8:32). Now the word of God is the only pure, unmixed and solid truth. “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). In most other things as to the best evidence attainable, men wander in the wilderness of endless conjectures. The truth of the word of God alone is stable, firm, infallible, and [that] which gives rest to the soul. As God is a “God of truth” (Deut. 32:4), the “only true God” (John 17:3), so he is, and he is alone essentially truth, and the eternal spring of it unto all other things. Hereof is this word the only revelation. How excellent, how desirable, therefore, must it needs be, and what a goodness to be preferred above all other things must it be accompanied withal! As it is infallible truth, giving light to the eyes and rest to the soul, it is the “good Word of God.”

{2} It is so in the matter of it, or the doctrines contained in it. As, 1st, the nature and properties of God are declared therein. God being only good, the only fountain and cause of all goodness, and in whose enjoyment all rest and blessedness do consist, the revelation made of him, his nature and attributes, reflects a singular goodness on it (John 17:3). If it be incomparably better to know God, than to enjoy the whole world and all that is in it, that word must be good whereby he is revealed unto us (Jer. 9:23–24). 2nd, it is exceeding good in the revelation of the glorious mystery of the Trinity, therein alone contained. This is that mystery the knowledge whereof is the only means to have a right apprehension of all other sacred truths; and without it, not one of them can be understood in a due manner, nor improved unto a due end. This is that alone which will give true rest and peace to the soul. And there is not the meanest true believer in the world, who is exercised in faith and obedience, but he has the power of this truth in and upon his mind, though he be not able to speak much of the notions of it. All grace and truth are built hereon and do center herein, and thence derive their first power and efficacy. Not one saving apprehension can we have of any gracious dispensation of God toward us, but it is resolved into the existence of God in Trinity of persons, and the economy of their operations with respect unto us. It is a “good” word whereby that mystery is revealed. 3rd, it is so in the revelation of the whole mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God, with all the effects of infinite wisdom and grace thereunto belonging. What a satisfactory goodness this is accompanied withal, it is the most part of my business in this world to inquire and declare. 4th, it is

so in the declaration of all the benefits of the mediation of Christ, in mercy, grace, pardon, justification, adoption, etc.

{3} It is a good word with respect unto its blessed effects (Ps. 19:7–9; Acts 20:32; James 1:21). On this account the psalmist assures us that it is “more to be desired than gold, yea than much fine gold”; that it is “sweeter than honey or the honey-comb” (Ps. 19:10). That is, there is an incomparable excellency, worth, and goodness in it. And he who discerns not this goodness in the word of God is a stranger unto all real benefits by it.

How Do Apostates Taste the Good Word, and to What Effect?

[5] How apostatizing persons do taste of this good word of God may be briefly declared. And their so doing has respect unto the threefold property of it mentioned, whence it is denominated good: {1} its truth; {2} its subject matter; {3} its effects.

And, {1} they taste of it as it is true in the convictions they have thereof, in their knowledge in it, and acknowledgment of it. This gives (as it is the nature of truth to do) some serenity and satisfaction unto their minds, although they are not renewed thereby. They that heard John preach the truth “rejoiced in his light,” as finding much present satisfaction therein (John 5:35). So was it with them (Luke 4:22; John 7:46), and others innumerable on the like occasion of hearing our Savior preach. When men through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ do escape the pollutions that are in the world through lust, and them that live in error, they taste a goodness, a sweetness, in the rest and satisfaction of their minds, so as that they suppose they are really possessed of the things themselves.

{2} With respect unto the matter of the word, they have a taste of its goodness in the hopes which they have of their future enjoyment. Mercy, pardon, life, immortality and glory, are all proposed in the “good Word” of God. These upon those grounds which will fail them at last, they have such hopes to be made partakers of, as that they find a great relish and satisfaction therein, especially when they have relief thereby against their fears and convictions. For even in those ways wherein they deceive themselves, they have a taste of what sweetness and goodness there is in these things unto them by whom they are enjoyed. And as those who really believe and receive Jesus Christ in the word, do thereon “rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Pet. 1:8), so those who only taste of the word, do feel in themselves a great complacency in their affections (Matt. 13:20). For,

{3} By this taste they may receive many effects of the word on their minds and consciences, and therein have an experience of the word, as unto its

power and efficacy. It belongs unto the exposition of the place to speak a little hereunto; and withal⁹⁵ to declare what the difference is between them, and wherein this tasting comes short of that receiving and feeding on the word by faith, which is peculiar unto true believers.

1st, this taste is accompanied, or it may be so, with delight, pleasure, and satisfaction in hearing of the word preached, especially when it is dispensed by any skillful master of assemblies, who finds out⁹⁶ “acceptable words,” or “words of delight,” which yet are upright, and truth (Eccles. 12:10–11). So was it with those naughty Jews (Ezek. 33:31–32), with Herod, who heard John the Baptist gladly, finding delight and pleasure in his preaching. So was it with multitudes that pressed after Christ to hear the word; and so it is to be feared that it is with many in the days wherein we live.

2nd, it gives not only delight in hearing, but some joy in the things heard. Such are the hearers of the word whom our Savior compared to the stony ground; they receive it with joy (Matt. 13:20), as it was with the hearers of John the Baptist (John 5:35). The word, as tasted only, has this effect on their minds, as that they shall rejoice in the things they hear; not with abiding, solid joy, not with “joy unspeakable and full of glory,”⁹⁷ but that which is temporary and evanid.⁹⁸ And this arises from that satisfaction which they find in hearing of the good things declared; such are mercy, pardon, grace, immortality, and glory. They cannot but rejoice sometimes at the hearing of them, though they will not be at the pains of getting an interest in them.

3rd, the word only thus tasted of, will work on men a change and reformation of their lives, with a readiness unto the performance of many duties (2 Pet. 2:18, 20; Mark 6:20). And,

4th, what inward effects it may have on the minds and affections of men, in illumination, conviction, and humiliation, I have declared at large elsewhere. But, all this while this is but tasting; the word of the gospel and Christ preached therein, is the food of our souls, and true faith does not only taste it, but feed upon it, whereby it is turned into grace and spiritual nourishment in the heart. And hereunto is required; 1. The “laying it up,” or treasuring of it in the heart (Luke 1:66; 2:19). No nourishment will ever be obtained by food, unless it be received into the stomach, where the means and causes of digestion and communication are placed. And

⁹⁵ I.e., in addition.

⁹⁶ I.e., makes known; displays.

⁹⁷ 1 Pet. 1:8.

⁹⁸ I.e., illusory; liable to disappear.

if the word be not placed in the heart by fixed meditation and delight, it may please for a season, but it will not nourish the soul. 2. Food must be mixed and incorporated with the digestive humor, power, and faculty of the stomach, whereinsoever it consists, or it will not nourish. Give a man never so much food, if there be any noxious⁹⁹ humor¹⁰⁰ in the stomach hindering it from mixing itself with the means of digestion, it will no way profit him. And until the word in the heart be mixed and incorporated with faith, it will not advantage us (Heb. 4:2), and there is nothing hereof where there is a taste of the word only. 3. When men feed on the word, it is turned into a principle of life, spiritual strength, and growth within, which a taste of it only will not give. As food when it is digested, turns into flesh and blood and spirits; so does the word and Christ therein unto the souls of men spiritually. Hence Christ becomes our life, and lives in us, as the efficient cause of our spiritual life (Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:3); and we grow and increase by the word (1 Pet. 2:2). A mere taste, though it may yield present refreshment, yet it communicates no abiding strength. Hence multitudes relish the word when it is preached, but never attain life, or strength, or growth by it. 4. The word received as it ought, will transform the soul into the likeness of God, who sends us this food to change our whole spiritual constitution, and to render our nature like unto his, in righteousness and true holiness (Eph. 4:21–24; 2 Cor. 3:18). This a taste only will effect nothing toward. Nor, to conclude, will it give us such a love of the truth as to abide by it in trials or temptations (2 Thess. 2:10), nor bring forth the fruits of it in universal obedience. And I might further discourse from hence of the deplorable condition of them who satisfy their minds in mere notions of the truth, and empty speculations about it, without once attaining so much as a taste of the goodness of the word; of which sort there are many in the world; as also show the necessity which all the hearers of the word lie under, of a severe scrutiny into their own souls, whether they do not rest in a taste only of the word, but come short of feeding upon it, and of Christ therein; but that I must not divert from the text. What has been here spoken, was needful to declare the true state and condition of the persons spoken of. The second proposition mentioned has been treated of elsewhere.

⁹⁹ I.e., corrupting, harmful, or destructive to life or health.

¹⁰⁰ I.e., temperament. In premodern medicine, a person's physical and mental constitution (temperament) was thought to be determined by the relative proportions of one of the four elemental fluids of the body: blood (sanguine humor), phlegm (phlegmatic humor), black bile (melancholic humor), and yellow bile (choleric humor).

The Apostates Had Tasted the Powers of the World to Come

(5) Lastly, it is added, δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος; “And the powers of the world to come.” Δυνάμεις are הגבורות¹⁰¹ or גפלאות,¹⁰² the mighty, great, miraculous operations and works of the Holy Ghost. What they were, and how they were wrought among these Hebrews, has been declared in our exposition on Hebrews 2:4, whither I refer the reader;¹⁰³ and they are known from the Acts of the Apostles, where sundry instances of them are recorded. I have also proved on that chapter, that by the “world to come,” our apostle in this epistle intends the days of the Messiah, that being the usual name of it in the church at that time, as the new world which God had promised to create. Wherefore these “powers of the world to come,” were the gifts whereby those signs, wonders, and mighty works, were then wrought by the Holy Ghost, according as it was foretold by the prophets, that they should be so. See Joel 2 compared with Acts 2. These the persons spoken of, are supposed to have tasted; for the particle τε¹⁰⁴ refers to γευσσάμενας¹⁰⁵ foregoing. Either they had been wrought in and by themselves, or by others in their sight, whereby they had had an experience of the glorious and powerful working of the Holy Ghost in the confirmation of the gospel. Yea, I do judge that themselves in their own persons were partakers of these powers in the gift of tongues and other miraculous operations, which was the highest aggravation possible of their apostasy, and that which peculiarly rendered their recovery impossible. For there is not in the Scripture an impossibility put upon the recovery of any, but such as peculiarly sin against the Holy Ghost; and although that guilt may be otherwise contracted, yet in none so signally as this of rejecting that truth which was confirmed by his mighty operations in them that rejected it; which could not be done without an ascription of his divine power unto the devil. Yet would I not fix on those extraordinary gifts exclusively unto those that are ordinary. They also are of the “powers of the world to come.” So is everything that belongs to the erection or preservation of the new world, or the kingdom of Christ. To the first setting up of a kingdom great and mighty power is required; but being set up, the ordinary dispensation of power will preserve it. So is it

¹⁰¹ Heb. “powers.”

¹⁰² Heb. “wonders.”

¹⁰³ *Exercitations on the Epistle to the Hebrews. Also concerning the Messiah* (1668), commentary on Heb. 2:2–4.

¹⁰⁴ The particle τε, translated “and” here, is a marker of connection between concepts, phrases, and words in a clause. Here it serves to continue the idea of the verb “who have tasted” earlier in the clause.

¹⁰⁵ Gk. “who have tasted.” The NA²⁸ reads, γευσσάμεμους.

in this matter. The extraordinary miraculous gifts of the Spirit were used in the erection of Christ's kingdom, but it is continued by ordinary gifts, which therefore also belong unto the "powers of the world to come."

WHO THE APOSTATES WERE AND WHAT THEY FELL FROM

5.¹⁰⁶ From the consideration of this description in all the parts of it, we may understand what sort of persons it is that is here intended by the apostle. And it appears, yea, is evident,

They Had Never Been True Believers

(1) That the persons here intended are not true and sincere believers in the strict and proper sense of that name, at least they are not described here as such, so that from hence nothing can be concluded concerning them that are so, as to the possibility of their total and final apostasy. For, [1] there is in their full and large description no mention of faith or believing, either expressly or in terms equivalent. And in no other place of the Scripture are such intended, but they are mentioned by what belongs essentially to their state. And, [2] there is not anything ascribed to these persons, that is peculiar to them as such, or discriminative of them, as taken either from their especial relation unto God in Christ, or any such property of their own, as is not communicable unto others. For instance, they are not said to be called according to God's purpose, to be born again not of the will of man, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God;¹⁰⁷ not to be justified, or sanctified, or united unto Christ, or to be the sons of God by adoption,¹⁰⁸ nor have they any other characteristic note of true believers ascribed to them. [3] They are in the following verses compared to the ground on which the rain often falls, and bears nothing but thorns and briers. But this is not so with true believers; for faith itself is an herb peculiar to the enclosed garden of Christ, and meet for him by whom we are dressed. [4] The apostle discoursing afterward of true believers, does in many particulars distinguish them from such as might be apostates, which is supposed of the persons here intended, as was in part before declared. For, {1} he ascribes unto them in general "better things" and such as accompany salvation, as we observed (Heb. 6:9). {2} He ascribes unto them a work and "labour of love," as it is true faith alone which works

¹⁰⁶ Number 5 here corresponds to number 3 above: "What is supposed concerning them."

¹⁰⁷ John 1:12-13.

¹⁰⁸ Rom. 8:15; 9:26; Gal. 3:26; Eph. 1:5.

by love (Heb. 6:10), whereof he speaks not one word concerning these. {3} He asserts their preservation, 1st, on the account of the righteousness and faithfulness of God (Heb. 6:11); 2nd, of the immutability of his counsel concerning them (Heb. 6:17–18). In all these and sundry other instances does he put a difference between these apostates and true believers. And whereas the apostle intends to declare the aggravation of their sin in falling away by the principal privileges whereof they were made partakers, here is not one word in name or thing of those which he expressly assigns to be the chief privileges of true believers (Rom. 8:27–30).

They Fell from Light, Gifts, Privileges, and Profession into a Course of Sin

(2) Our next inquiry is more particularly whom he does intend. And [1] they were such as not long before were converted from Judaism unto Christianity, upon the evidence of the truth of its doctrine, and the miraculous operations wherewith its dispensation was accompanied. [2] He intends not the common sort of them, but such as had obtained especial privileges among them. For they had received extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost, as speaking with tongues, or working of miracles. And, [3] they had found in themselves and others convincing evidences that the kingdom of God and the Messiah, which they called the “world to come,” was come unto them, and had satisfaction in the glories of it. [4] Such persons as these, as they have a work of light on their minds, so according unto the efficacy of their convictions may have such a change wrought upon their affections and in their conversation, as that they may be of great esteem among professors; and such these here intended might be. Now it must needs be some horrible frame of spirit, some malicious enmity against the truth and holiness of Christ and the gospel, some violent love of sin and the world, that could turn off such persons as these from the faith, and blot out all that light and conviction of truth, which they had received. But the least grace is a better security for heaven than the greatest gifts or privileges whatever.

These are the persons concerning whom our apostle discourses, and of them it is supposed by him that they may “fall away,” *καὶ παραπεσόντας*. The especial nature of the sin here intended is afterward declared in two instances or aggravating circumstances. This word expresses the respect it had to the state and condition of the sinners themselves; they “fall away,” do that whereby they do so. I think we have well expressed the word, if they “shall fall away.” Our old translations rendered it only, “If they shall fall,” which expressed not the sense of the word, and was liable unto a sense not

at all intended. For he does not say, if they shall fall into sin, this or that or any sin whatever that can be named; suppose the greatest sin imaginable, namely, the denial of Christ in the time of danger and persecution. This was that sin (as we intimated before) about which so many contests were raised of old, and so many canons were multiplied about the ordering of them who had contracted the guilt thereof. But one example, well considered, had been a better guide for them than all their own arbitrary rules and imaginations. For Peter fell into this sin, and yet was renewed again to repentance, and that speedily. Wherefore we may lay down this in the first place as to the sense of the words: There is no particular sin, that any man may fall into occasionally through the power of temptation, that can cast the sinner under this commination, so that it should be impossible to renew him to repentance. It must therefore, secondly, be a course of sin or sinning that is intended. But there are various degrees herein also, yea, there are divers kinds of such courses in sin. A man may so fall into a way of sin as still to retain in his mind such a principle of light and conviction that may be suitable to his recovery. To exclude such from all hopes of repentance, is expressly contrary to Ezekiel 18:21, Isaiah 55:7, yea, and to the whole sense of the Scripture. Wherefore men after some conviction and reformation of life, may fall into corrupt and wicked courses and make a long abode or continuance in them. Examples hereof we have every day among us, although it may be none to parallel that of Manasseh. Consider the nature of his education, under his father Hezekiah, the greatness of his sins, the length of his continuance in them, with his following recovery, and he is a great instance in this case.¹⁰⁹ While there is in such persons any seed of light or conviction of truth which is capable of an excitation¹¹⁰ or revival, so as to put forth its power and efficacy in their souls, they cannot be looked on to be in the condition intended, though their case be dangerous.

This “Falling Away” Is a Total Renunciation of the Principal Doctrines of Christianity

(3) Our apostle makes a distinction between *πταίω*¹¹¹ and *πίπτω*¹¹² (Rom. 11:11), between “stumbling” and “falling” and would not allow that the unbelieving Jews of those days were come so far as *πίπτειν*, that is, “to fall” absolutely, *λέγω οὖν, μὴ ἔπταισαν ἵνα πέσωσι; μὴ γένοιτο;* “I say then, ‘Have

¹⁰⁹ 2 Chron. 33:1–20.

¹¹⁰ I.e., excitement.

¹¹¹ Gk. “to stumble.”

¹¹² Gk. “to fall (down).”

they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid”; that is, absolutely and irrecoverably. So therefore does that word signify in this place. And παραπίπτω¹¹³ increases the signification, either as to perverseness in the manner of the fall, or as to violence in the fall itself.

From what has been discoursed, it will appear, what falling away it is that the apostle here intends. And,

[1] It is not a falling into this or that actual sin, be it of what nature it will, which may be, and yet not be a “falling away.”

[2] It is not a falling upon temptation or surprisal,¹¹⁴ for concerning such fallings we have rules of another kind given us in sundry places, and those exemplified in especial instances; but it is that which is premeditated, of deliberation and choice.

[3] It is not a falling by relinquishment or renunciation of some though very material principles of Christian religion, by error or seduction, as the Corinthians fell, in denying the resurrection of the dead,¹¹⁵ and the Galatians by denying justification by faith in Christ alone.¹¹⁶ Wherefore,

[4] It must consist in a total renunciation of all the constituent principles and doctrines of Christianity, whence it is denominated. Such was the sin of them who relinquished the gospel to return unto Judaism as it was then stated, in opposition unto it and hatred of it. This it was, and not any kind of actual sins that the apostle manifestly discourses concerning.

[5] For the completing of this falling away according to the intention of the apostle, it is required that this renunciation be avowed and professed; as, when a man forsakes the profession of the gospel, and falls into Judaism, or Mohammedanism,¹¹⁷ or Gentilism,¹¹⁸ in persuasion and practice. For the apostle discourses concerning faith and obedience as professed, and so therefore also of their contraries. And this avowment¹¹⁹ of a relinquishment of the gospel has many provoking aggravations attending it. And yet whereas some men may in their hearts and minds utterly renounce the gospel, but upon some outward, secular considerations either dare not or will not profess that inward renunciation, their falling away is complete and total in the sight of God; and all they do to cover their apostasy in an external compliance

¹¹³ Gk. “to fall away or commit apostasy.”

¹¹⁴ I.e., occasion of surprise.

¹¹⁵ 1 Cor. 15:12.

¹¹⁶ Gal. 1:6–9.

¹¹⁷ I.e., Islam.

¹¹⁸ I.e., paganism or heathenism (having barbaric morals or behavior).

¹¹⁹ I.e., acknowledgement; declaration; profession.

with Christian religion, is in the sight of God but a mocking of him, and the highest aggravation of their sin.

This is the “falling away” intended by the apostle; a voluntary, resolved relinquishment of, and apostasy from, the gospel, the faith, rule, and obedience thereof, which cannot be without casting the highest reproach and contumely¹²⁰ imaginable upon the person of Christ himself, as it is afterward expressed.

HOW AND WHY THE RENEWAL OF APOSTATES IS IMPOSSIBLE

6.¹²¹ Concerning these persons and their thus “falling away,” two things are to be considered in the text. (1) What is affirmed of them. (2) The reason of that affirmation.

The Renewal of Apostates Is Impossible

The Meaning of “It Is Impossible”

(1) The first is, that it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance. The thing intended is negative; to renew them again unto repentance, this is denied of them; but the modification of that negation turns the proposition into an affirmation: “It is impossible so to do.”

Ἄδυνάτων γὰρ.¹²² The importance¹²³ of this word is dubious; some think an absolute, and others only a moral impossibility is intended thereby. This latter most fix upon, so that it is a matter rare, difficult, and seldom to be expected, that is intended, and not that which is absolutely impossible. Considerable reasons and instances are produced for either interpretation. But we must look farther into the meaning of it.

[1] All future events depend on God, who alone does necessarily exist.¹²⁴ Other things may be or may not be, as they respect him or his will. And so

¹²⁰ I.e., insulting, humiliating display of contempt in words or actions.

¹²¹ Number 6 here corresponds to number 4 above: “What is affirmed of them on that supposition [i.e., the supposition discussed in number 3].”

¹²² Gk. “for it is impossible.”

¹²³ I.e., import; meaning.

¹²⁴ Here Owen is using “traditional scholastic arguments concerning the nature of God, the contingency of all future events, and the will of God” to discuss the precise “significance of the term ‘impossible.’” Knapp, “John Owen’s Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6,” 50–51. By saying that God alone “necessarily exists,” Owen touches on the doctrine of God’s attribute of aseity. Aseity, which is derived from the prefix *a* (“from”) and word *se* (“self”) in Latin, points to the fact that God is self-existent and self-sufficient. “Nothing is more characteristic of God than

things that are future may be said to be impossible, to be so, either with respect unto the nature of God, or his decrees, or his moral rule, order, and law. Things are impossible with respect unto the nature of God, either absolutely as being inconsistent with his being and essential properties; so it is “impossible that God should lie”;¹²⁵ or on some supposition; so it is impossible that God should “forgive sin without satisfaction,”¹²⁶ on the supposition of his law and the sanction of it. In this sense the repentance of these apostates it may be is not impossible, I say it may be; it may be there is nothing in it contrary to any essential properties of the nature of God, either directly or reductively. But I will not be positive herein. For the things ascribed unto these apostates are such, namely, “their crucifying the Son of God afresh, and putting him to an open shame,”¹²⁷ as that I know not but that it may be contrary to the holiness and righteousness and glory of God as the supreme ruler of the world, to have any more mercy on them than on the devils themselves, or those that are in hell. But I will not assert this to be the meaning of the place.

[2] Again, things possible in themselves, and with respect unto the nature of God, are rendered impossible by God’s decree and purpose; he has absolutely determined, that they shall never be. So it was impossible that Saul and his posterity should be preserved in the kingdom of Israel. It was not contrary to the nature of God, but God had decreed that it should not be (1 Sam. 15:28–29). But the decrees of God respecting persons in particular, and not qualifications in the first place, they cannot be here intended; because they are free acts of his will, not revealed, neither in particular, nor by virtue of any general rule, as they are sovereign acts making differences between persons in the same condition (Rom. 9:11–12). What is possible or impossible with respect unto the nature of God we may know in some good measure from the certain knowledge we may have of his being and essential properties. But what is so one way or [an]other with respect unto his decrees or purposes,

eternity and self-existence.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 1.14.3. God is therefore independent of his creation: “the world is not necessary for God’s being or happiness.” Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 76.

¹²⁵ Heb. 6:18.

¹²⁶ Owen seems to be alluding to *Cur Deus homo* (*Why God Became Man*) by Anselm (1033–1109), archbishop of Canterbury (1093–1109), “Therefore, believe most assuredly that without satisfaction [i.e., voluntary payment of the debt] God cannot forgive unpunished sin and the sinner cannot arrive at happiness—not even such happiness as he had before he sinned.” Anselm, *Cur Deus homo*, in *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury*, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Minneapolis: A. J. Banning, 2000), 337.

¹²⁷ Heb. 6:6.

which are sovereign free acts of his will, knows no man, not [even] the angels in heaven (Isa. 40:13–14; Rom. 11:34).

[3] Things are possible or impossible with respect unto the rule and order of all things that God has appointed. When in things of duty God has neither expressly commanded them, nor appointed means for the performance of them, then are we to look upon them as impossible, and then with respect unto us they are so absolutely and so to be esteemed. And this is the impossibility here principally intended. It is a thing that God has neither commanded us to endeavor, nor appointed means to attain it, nor promised to assist us in it. It is therefore that which we have no reason to look after, attempt or expect, as being not possible by any law, rule, or constitution of God.¹²⁸

The apostle instructs us no further in the nature of future events, but as our own duty is concerned in them. It is not for us either to look, or hope, or pray for, or endeavor the renewal of such persons unto repentance. God gives law unto us in these things, not unto himself. It may be possible with God for aught¹²⁹ we know, if there be not a contradiction in it unto any holy properties of his nature; only he will not have us to expect any such things from him, nor has he appointed any means for us to endeavor it. What he shall do we ought thankfully to accept; but our own duty toward such persons is absolutely at an end. And indeed they put themselves wholly out of our reach.

That which is said to be thus impossible with respect unto these persons is, *πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν*, “to renew them again unto repentance.” *Μετάνοια* in the New Testament, with respect unto God, signifies a “gracious change of mind” on gospel principles and promises, leading the whole soul into conversion unto God *תשובה*.¹³⁰ This is the beginning and entrance of

¹²⁸ Owen’s discussion of what is possible or impossible with God proffers the scholastic view that as creator, God determines the limits of possibility and impossibility according to the rule, order, and commands he set in place. Owen’s point is that it is impossible to do things that God has neither commanded nor given means to accomplish (e.g., renewing apostates to repentance). This is related to the general scholastic position that some things are “intrinsically impossible” to an omnipotent God, such as logical contradictions (e.g., God cannot create a circle that is at the same time a square) or contradictions of his own nature or will (e.g., God cannot sin). The question of whether it is possible for God to make an infinite rock that even he cannot move, for instance, is thus nonsensical since rocks are intrinsically finite and since such a hypothetical stone is not “a proper object” of God’s power. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s, 2011), 1.25.3–5. On hypothetical objects of God’s power, Lewis remarks, “You may attribute miracles to Him, but not nonsense. . . . Meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words ‘God can.’ . . . Nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.” C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 18.

¹²⁹ I.e., anything.

¹³⁰ Heb. “return; repentance; an answer.”

our turning to God, without which neither the will nor the affections will be engaged unto him, nor is it possible for sinners to find acceptance with him.

It is impossible ἀνακαινίζειν, “to renew.” The construction of the words is defective, and must be supplied; σε¹³¹ may be added, to renew themselves; it is not possible they should do so; or τίνας,¹³² that some should, that any should renew them; and this I judge to be intended. For the impossibility mentioned respects the duty and endeavors of others. In vain shall any attempt their recovery, by the use of any means whatever. And we must inquire what it is to be “renewed,” and what it is to be renewed “again.”

The Meaning of “to Renew”

(2) Now, our ἀνακαινισμό¹³³ is the renovation of the image of God in our natures whereby we are dedicated again unto him. For as we had lost the image of God by sin, and were separated from him as things profane, this ἀνακαινισμό^ς respects both the restoration of our nature and the dedication of our persons to God. And it is twofold.

[1] First, real and internal, in regeneration and effectual sanctification: “The washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Titus 3:5; 1 Thess. 5:23). But this is not that which is here intended. For this these apostates never had, and so cannot be said to be “renewed again” unto it. For no man can be renewed again unto that which he never had.

[2] Secondly, it is outward in the profession and pledge of it. Wherefore renovation in this sense consists in the solemn confession of faith and repentance by Jesus Christ, with the seal of baptism received thereon. For thus it was with all those who were converted unto the gospel. Upon their profession of repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, they received the baptismal pledge of an inward renovation though really they were not partakers thereof. But this estate was their ἀνακαινισμό^ς; their renovation. From this state they fell totally, renouncing him who is the author of it, his grace which is the cause of it, and the ordinance which is the pledge thereof.

Hence it appears what it is πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν, “to renew them again.” It is to bring them again into this state of profession by a second renovation, and a second baptism as a pledge thereof. This is determined impossible, and so unwarrantable for any to attempt. And for the most part such persons do openly fall into such blasphemies against, and engage (if they have power) into such persecution of the truth, as that they give themselves sufficient

¹³¹ Gk. “you.”

¹³² Gk. “some(one).”

¹³³ Gk. “renewal, renovation.”

direction how others should behave themselves toward them. So the ancient church was satisfied in the case of Julian.¹³⁴ This is the sum of what is affirmed concerning these apostates, namely, that it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance; that is, so to act toward them as to bring them to that repentance whereby they may be instated in their former condition.

Summary of the Apostle's Argument

(3) Hence sundry things may be observed for the clearing of the apostle's design in this discourse. As,

[1] Here is nothing said concerning the acceptance or refusal of any upon repentance or the profession thereof after any sin, to be made by the church, whose judgment is to be determined by other rules and circumstances. And this perfectly excludes the pretense of the Novatians from any countenance in these words. For whereas they would have drawn their warranty from hence for the utter exclusion from church communion of all those who had denied the faith in times of persecution, although they expressed a repentance whose sincerity they could not evince; those only are intended, who neither do, nor can come to repentance itself, nor make a profession of it, with whom the church had no more to do. It is not said that men who ever thus fell away, shall not upon their repentance be admitted again into their former state in the church; but that such is the severity of God against them that he will not again give them repentance unto life.

[2] Here is nothing that may be brought in bar against such as having fallen by any great sin, or any course in sinning, and that after light, convictions, and gifts received and exercised, who desire to repent of their sins and endeavor after sincerity therein. Yea, such a desire and endeavor exempt anyone from the judgment here threatened.

There is therefore in it that which tends greatly to the encouragement of such sinners. For, whereas it is here declared concerning those who are thus rejected of God, that it is impossible to "renew them," or to do anything toward them that shall have a tendency unto repentance; those who are not satisfied that they do yet savingly repent, but only are sincerely exercised how they may

¹³⁴ Julian (331–363), a Roman emperor from 361 to 363, was raised as a Christian, baptized, and ordained as a lector (i.e., one who was permitted publicly to read Scripture during worship services). His anti-Christian sentiment, however, was revealed after his rise to power. He is sometimes called Julian the Apostate for his attempts "to overthrow the church and reestablish the ancient pagan faith" during his reign. Thus the church was "satisfied," as Owen says, to treat him as an apostate because his blasphemy of Christ and persecution of Christians made his apostasy undeniable. Glanville Downey, "Julian the Apostate at Antioch," *Church History* 8, no. 4 (1939): 303.

attain thereunto, have no concernment in this commination; but evidently have the door of mercy still open unto them. For it is shut only against those who shall never endeavor to turn by repentance. And although persons so rejected of God, may fall under convictions of their sin attended with despair, which is unto them a foresight of their future condition; yet as unto the least attempt after repentance on the terms of the gospel, they do never rise up unto it. Wherefore, the impossibility intended of what sort soever it be, respects the severity of God, not in refusing or rejecting the greatest sinners which seek after and would be renewed unto repentance, which is contrary unto innumerable of his promises; but in the giving up such sinners as these are here mentioned unto such obdurateness¹³⁵ and obstinacy¹³⁶ in sinning, that blindness of mind, and hardness of heart, as that they neither will nor shall ever sincerely seek after repentance, nor may any means according to the mind of God be used to bring them thereunto. And the righteousness of the exercise of this severity is taken from the nature of this sin or what is contained in it, which the apostle declares in the ensuing instances. And we may in our passage observe that,

In the preaching of the gospel, it is necessary to propose unto men, and to insist on the severity of God, in dealing with provoking sinners against it. And indeed the severity of God is principally though not solely exercised with respect unto sins against the gospel. This our apostle calls us to the consideration of, in the case of the unbelieving Jews: "Ἴδε οὖν χρηστότητα καὶ ἀποτομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ; ἐπὶ μὲν τοὺς πεισόντας ἀποτομίαν (Rom. 11:22). "Behold the goodness and severity of God; towards them that fell" (those in the text), "severity." Ἀποτομία is a sharp dissection or cutting off. I do not therefore understand by it an essential property of the nature of God. It is not the same with his holiness, righteousness, or vindictive justice. These are essential properties of the divine nature, whence it is that he neither will nor can absolutely suffer men to sin, and let them go forever unpunished without any satisfaction or atonement made for their sins, whereof we have treated elsewhere. But by God's "severity" is intended the free act of his will, acting according unto these properties of his nature in an eminent manner, when and how he pleases.¹³⁷ And therefore into them it is resolved. So our apostle

¹³⁵ I.e., stubborn determination to do wrong.

¹³⁶ I.e., stubbornness.

¹³⁷ By distinguishing an "essential property of the nature of God" (i.e., holiness) from circumstantial properties or attributes (i.e., severity), Owen is marshaling the distinction between "essence" and "accident," which is a key element of the Aristotelian logic used in scholastic theology. In this distinction, a subject (e.g., "Plato") has certain attributes (being human, being Greek,

when he would intimate this “severity” unto us to ingenerate¹³⁸ in us a holy fear and reverence of God in his worship, adds as his motive, “For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29)—that is, of an infinitely pure, holy, righteous nature, according to which he will deal with us, and so may unexpectedly break forth upon us in “severity” if we labor not for grace to serve him acceptably with reverence and godly fear. Wherefore this severity of God is his exemplary dealing with provoking sinners according to the exigence¹³⁹ of his holiness and wisdom, without an interposition of longer patience or forbearance. There are some sins or degrees in sinning that neither the holiness, nor majesty, nor wisdom of God can so bear withal, as to suffer them to pass unpunished or unremarked on in this world. In such cases is God said to exercise his “severity.” And he does so,

How God Exercises His Severity

{1} In extraordinary outward judgments upon open, profligate sinners, especially the enemies of his church and glory. Hence on such an occasion does God give that description of himself, “God is jealous, and the Lord revengeth, the Lord revengeth, and is furious; the Lord will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies” (Nah. 1:2). When God acts toward his adversaries according to the description here given of himself, he deals with them in severity. And two things are required to make these judgments of God against his adversaries in this world to be instances thereof. 1st, that they be unusual, such as do not commonly and frequently fall out in the ordinary dispensation of divine providence (Num. 16:29–30). God does not in the government of the world suffer anything to fall out or come to pass that in the issue shall be contrary to his justice, or inconsistent with his righteousness. But yet he bears with things so for the most part, as that he will manifest himself to be exceedingly full of patience and long-suffering,

or being wise), but some attributes (or properties) are essential (being human) and some are accidental (being wise) to the nature of the subject. T. Theo J. Pleizier and Maarten Wisse, “As the Philosopher Says’: Aristotle,” in *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, ed. Willem J. van Asselt (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2011), 26–44. Statements such as this in Owen’s work show that “he employed the arguments and methods of Aristotelian philosophy, as developed in Thomism and mediaeval scholasticism, to decide which were the real [i.e., essential] properties of Deity from among the manifold and apparently contradictory [i.e., accidental] attributes which the Scriptures, when literally understood, ascribed to Him” R. Glynne, Lloyd, “The Life and Work of the Reverend John Owen D. D., the Puritan Divine, with Special Reference to the Socinian Controversies of the Seventeenth Century” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1942), 174.

¹³⁸ I.e., beget; produce; generate.

¹³⁹ I.e., exigency; urgency.

as also to exercise the faith of them that believe in the expectation of a future judgment. Wherefore there must be somewhat extraordinary in those judgments wherein God will exercise and manifest severity. So it is expressed, "The Lord shall rise up as in mount Perazim, he shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon, that he may do his work, his strange work, and bring to pass his act, his strange act" (Isa. 28:21). The work he will do is "his" work, but it is his "strange" work; that is, not strange from or opposite unto his nature, for so he will do nothing; but that which is unusual, which he does but seldom, and is therefore marvelous. Thus in sudden destructions of persecutors or persons of a flagitious wickedness, in great desolations of provoking families, cities and nations, in fire from heaven, in inundations, plagues, earthquakes, and such sudden, extraordinary, consuming judgments, God gives instances of his severity in the world (Rom. 1:18).¶

2nd, in this case it is required that such judgments be open, visible, and manifest both unto those who are punished, and to others who wisely consider them. So God speaks of himself: "God that repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them: he will not be slack to him that hateth him, he will repay him to his face" (Deut. 7:10); that is, he will do it openly and manifestly, that themselves and all others shall take notice of his severity therein. This I say is one way whereby God acts his severity in this world. And hereby he pours everlasting contempt upon the security of his proudest and haughtiest adversaries. For when they think they have sufficiently provided for their own safety, and stopped all avenues of evil, according to the rules of their policy and wisdom, with the best observations they are able to make of the ordinary effects of his providence, and so give up themselves to take satisfaction in their lusts and pleasures, he breaks in upon them with an instance and example of his severity to their utter destruction. So, "when they say, 'Peace and safety;' then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape" (1 Thess. 5:3). This will be the state one day of the whole Babylonish interest in the world (Rev. 18:7-10). But this is not directly intended in this place, although even this effect of God's severity overtook these apostates afterward.

{2} In spiritual judgments. By these God in his severity leaves unprofitable, provoking, and apostate professors under the impossibility here intended of being renewed unto repentance. And this is the sorest of all God's judgments. There is in it a sentence of eternal damnation denounced on men aforehand in this world. So our apostle tells us, "Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment" (1 Tim. 5:24). God so passes judgment concerning them in this world, as that there shall be no alteration in their state and

condition to eternity. And this severity of God toward sinners under the gospel, shutting them up under final impenitency,¹⁴⁰ consists in these four things.

1st, God puts an end unto all his expectation concerning them; he looks for no more from them, and so exercises no more care about them. While God is pleased to afford the use of means for conversion and repentance unto any, he is said to look for and expect answerable fruits: I did, says he, so to my vineyard, “and I looked” that it should bring forth grapes (Isa. 5:2, 4). Wherefore, when God takes away all means of grace and repentance from any, then he puts an end unto his own expectation of any fruits. For if a man can have no fruit from his vineyard while he dresses it, or from his field while he tills it, he will never look for any after he has given them up and laid them waste. And on the other side, when he utterly ceases to look for any fruit from them, he will till them no more; for why should he put himself to charge or trouble to no purpose? Woe unto the souls of men when God in this sense looks for no more at their hands; that is, when he puts an end unto that patience or long-suffering toward them from whence all supplies of the means of conversion and repentance do arise and spring. This God does by some, and that in such ways as we shall afterward declare.

2nd, God will actually punish them with, or inflict on them hardness of heart and blindness of mind, that they never shall repent or believe: “Therefore they could not believe, because Esaias said again, ‘He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart, that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them’” (John 12:39–40). God will now judicially blind them and harden them, and, by one means or other, everything that befalls them shall promote their induration. So it was with these Jews; the doctrine of Christ filled them with envy, his holiness with malice, and his miracles with rage and madness. Their “table was a snare” to them,¹⁴¹ and that which should have been for their good turned to their hurt. So is it with all them whom God in his severity hardens. Whether the outward means be continued unto them or no, all is one, everything shall drive them farther from God and increase their obstinacy against him. From hence they become scoffers and persecutors, avowedly scorning and hating the truth. And herein it may be they shall please themselves until they are swallowed up in despair or the grave.

3rd, God usually in his severity gives them up unto “sensual lusts.” So he dealt with the idolaters of old: he “gave them up to vile affections” (Rom. 1:26),

¹⁴⁰ I.e., lack of regret or penitence.

¹⁴¹ Ps. 69:22.

such as those there described by the apostle; and in the pursuit of them “gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do the things that are not convenient” (Rom. 1:28). Whence they were “filled with all unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:29). So does God frequently deal with apostates from the gospel, or from the principal truths of it, unto idolatry and superstition. And when they are engaged in the pursuit of these lusts, especially when they are judicially given up unto them, they are held assuredly as under cords and chains unto final impenitency.

4th, God gave such persons up unto Satan to be blinded, and led by him into pernicious delusions: “Because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved, God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie; that they all might be damned who loved not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thess. 2:10–12). This was the state and condition of the persons here prophesied of: The truth of the gospel was preached unto them, and for some time professed by them. They received the truth, but they received not the love of it, so as to comply with it and improve it unto its proper end. This kept them barren and unprofitable under their profession. For where the truth is not loved, as well as believed or assented unto, it will bring forth no fruits. But this was not all; they had pleasure in their sins, lusts, and unrighteousnesses, resolving not to part with them on any terms. Whereas, therefore, these are all of them absolutely and without limitation judged and condemned by the truth of the gospel, they began to dislike and secretly to hate the truth itself. But whereas together with their lusts and unrighteousnesses wherein they had pleasure, they found a necessity of a religion one or other, or the pretense of some religion or other to give them countenance against the truth which they rejected, they were in a readiness to anything that should offer itself unto them. In this condition in the way of punishment, and as a revenge of their horrible ingratitude and contempt of his gospel, God gives them up to the power of Satan, who blinds, deludes, and deceives them with such efficacy, as that they shall not only readily embrace, but obstinately believe and adhere to the lies, errors, and falsehoods that he shall suggest unto them. And this is the way and course whereby so many carnal gospelers are turned off unto Romish idolatry every day.

Other instances of the severity of God on this occasion might be given, but these are fully sufficient to declare the manner of his dealing with such as those described in the text, whence it follows, that their renovation unto repentance is impossible. For what hopes or expectations should we have concerning such as God has utterly forsaken, whom he has judicially smitten with blindness and hardness of heart, whom he has given up not only to the power and efficacy of their own lusts and vile affections, but also immediately

unto Satan to be deluded and led captive at his pleasure? In vain shall the repentance of such persons be either expected or endeavored.

And this severity of God ought to be preached and insisted on in the declaration of the gospel. Let the reader consult what has been already offered concerning the use of gospel threatenings and comminations, on the third and fourth chapters.¹⁴² There is a proneness in corrupted nature to despise the riches of the goodness, forbearance, and long-suffering of God, not knowing that the goodness of God leads them to repentance, and thereon after their hardness and impenitent heart treasure up to themselves wrath against the day of wrath, as our apostle speaks (Rom. 2:4–5). Considering nothing in God but mercy and long-suffering, and nothing in the gospel but grace and pardon, they are ready to despise and turn them into lasciviousness,¹⁴³ or from them both to countenance themselves in their sins. By this means, on such mistaken apprehensions, suited to their lusts and corrupt inclinations, heightened by the craft of Satan, do multitudes under the preaching of the gospel harden themselves daily to destruction. And others there are, who although they will not on such wicked pretenses give up themselves to their lusts and carnal affections, yet for want of constant vigilance and watchfulness, are apt to have sloth and negligence with many ill frames of spirit to increase and grow upon them. Both sorts are to be stirred up by being put in mind of this severity of God. They are to be taught that there are secret powers accompanying the dispensation of the gospel, continually in a readiness to “revenge all disobedience” (2 Cor. 10:6); that God is not mocked, but “whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to the flesh, of the flesh shall reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting” (Gal. 6:7–8). But I have elsewhere already showed the necessity there was of arming the gospel with threatenings, as well as confirming of it with promises, so as that it may not be here again at large insisted on.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² *Exercitations on the Epistle concerning the Person of Christ. Wherein, the Original, Causes, Nature, Prefigurations, and Discharge of that Holy Office, Are Explained and Vindicated. . . . With a Continuation of the Exposition on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Chapters of the Said Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Nathaniel Ponder, 1674), commentary on Heb. 3:7–11, 15–19; 4:1–2, 12–13. Owen provides both a summary of his points on Hebrews 3–4 and a full commentary on these chapters.

¹⁴³ I.e., a mindset for lustfulness.

¹⁴⁴ “There is a mutual inbeing of the promises and threatenings of the covenant, so that in our faith and consideration of them they ought not utterly to be separated. . . . they have both of them the same rise and spring. Both promises and threatenings do flow from, and are expressive of the holy, gracious nature of God, with respect unto his actings towards men in covenant

From what has been discoursed, it is evident how necessary and wholesome a warning or threatening is here expressed by the apostle. It is the open mistakes of men that have drawn undue entanglements out of it; in itself it is both plain and necessary. Shall we be afraid to say that God will not renew such sinners as those before described unto repentance? Or to declare unto sinners that without repentance they cannot be saved? Or shall we preach to men, that whatever light they have had, whatever gifts they have received, whatever privileges they have been made partakers of, whatever profession they have made, or for how long a season soever, if they fall totally and despitefully from the gospel into that which is most opposite both to its truth and holiness, yet there is no doubt, but they may again repent and be saved? God forbid so great a wickedness¹⁴⁵ should fall from our mouths! Nay, we are to warn all persons in danger of such apostasies, that if anyone so draw back, God's soul shall have no pleasure in him;¹⁴⁶ that it is a "fearful thing" to fall into the hands of the living God;¹⁴⁷ that he will harden such sinners, and give them up to strong delusions that they may be damned;¹⁴⁸ that he is not under the engagement of any promise to give them repentance,¹⁴⁹ but has rather given many severe threatenings to the contrary. He has told us, that such persons are as "trees twice dead," plucked up by the roots,¹⁵⁰ of which there is no hope, that denying the Lord that bought them, they bring on themselves swift destruction, whose damnation slumbereth not,¹⁵¹ with the like declarations of severity against them innumerable.

But what shall be said unto them, who having through great temptations, and it may be fears and surprisals, for a season renounced the gospel; or such as by reason of great sins against light, and backsliding in profession, do apprehend themselves to be fallen into this condition, and yet are greatly desirous of a recovery, and do cry to God for repentance and acceptance? I answer as before, they are not at all concerned in this text. Here is nothing excluding them from acceptance with God and eternal salvation, be they

with himself" Owen, *Exercitations on the Epistle concerning the Person of Christ. . . . With a Continuation of the Exposition on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Chapters of the Said Epistle to the Hebrews*, commentary on on Heb. 4:1–2. On the gospel's use of both promises and threatenings, see Owen's commentary on Heb. 4:1–2, 12–13.

¹⁴⁵ Gen. 39:9; Rom. 9:14.

¹⁴⁶ Heb. 10:38.

¹⁴⁷ Heb. 10:31.

¹⁴⁸ 2 Thess. 2:11.

¹⁴⁹ 2 Tim. 2:25.

¹⁵⁰ Jude 12–13.

¹⁵¹ 2 Pet. 2:1–2.

who or what they will that seek it by repentance; only there are some who are excluded by God, and do obstinately shut up themselves from all endeavors after repentance itself, with whom we have not anything to do.

It is true, those alone are here firstly and directly intended, who in those days had received extraordinary or miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost. But this by just analogy may be extended unto others, now those gifts are ceased in the church. For those gifts and privileges which are yet continued unto men do lay (in present circumstances) the same obligation upon them unto perseverance in profession, and give the same aggravation unto their apostasy, as did those extraordinary gifts formerly conferred upon profession. Let us not then be high-minded but fear. It is not good approaching too near a precipice. Let unprofitable hearers and backsliders in heart and ways be awaked,¹⁵² lest they may be nearer falling under God's severity than they are aware of. But we must return unto our apostle giving an account of the nature of this sin, which is attended with so sore a judgment. And this he does in a double instance.

Renewal Is Impossible Because the Sin of Apostates, Crucifying Christ Again, Is Unpardonable

(4) Ἀνασταυροῦντας ἑαυτοῖς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ.¹⁵³ Beza affirms that ἑαυτοῖς, “to themselves,” is absent from some copies, and then the words may admit of a sense diverse from that which is commonly received; for ἀνασταυροῦντας, “crucifying again,” may refer unto τινάς,¹⁵⁴ included and supposed in ἀνακαίνιζεν,¹⁵⁵ that some or any should renew them. It is impossible that any should renew them to repentance; for this cannot be done without crucifying the Son of God again, since these apostates have utterly rejected all interest in, and benefit by his death as once undergone for sinners. This none can do; we ought not, we cannot, crucify Christ again, that they may be renewed and saved. Who can entertain a thought tending toward a desire that so it might be? And this sense in the same or an alike case, the apostle plainly expresses, “If we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins” (Heb. 10:26–27). Christ cannot be offered again, and so crucified again, without which the sins of such persons cannot be expiated. For the unbloody sacrificing of Christ every day in the Mass was not as yet invented; and it is a relief fit only for them to trust unto,

¹⁵² I.e., awakened; made conscious, alert, and aware of.

¹⁵³ Gk. “seeing they crucify again to themselves the Son of God.”

¹⁵⁴ Gk. “someone.”

¹⁵⁵ Gk. “to renew.”

who have no interest in that sacrifice which he offered once for all. But there is in that other place an allusion to the sacrifices under the law. Because they could legally expiate no sins but what were past before their offering, they were to be frequently repeated upon reiterated sinning. So from time to time they sinned (as no man lives and sins not), and had sacrifices renewed for their sins, applied unto the particular sins they had committed. This could now be so no more, Christ being once offered for sin; whoever loses his interest in that one offering, and forfeits the benefit of it, there is no more sacrifice for him; Christ henceforth dies no more. It cannot be hence imagined that the grace of the gospel is restrained, as being all confined unto that one sacrifice, from what was represented in the multiplied sacrifices of the law.

For, [1] the one sacrifice of Christ extended farther, as to sins and persons, than all those of the law with all their repetitions put together: “By him all that believe are justified from those things which they could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). There were some sins under the law for which no sacrifice was provided, seeing he who was guilty of them was to die without mercy, as in the cases of murder and adultery, with respect whereunto David says, “Thou desirest not sacrifice else would I give it, thou delightest not in burnt-offering” (Ps. 51:16), namely, in such cases as his then was.

But [2] in case of apostasy from the one and the other, the event was the same. There was under the law no sacrifice appointed for him who had totally apostatized from its fundamental principles, or sinned ביד חזקה,¹⁵⁶ “presumptuously,” with a hand high and stubborn. This was that despising of Moses’ law, for which those that were guilty thereof were to “die without mercy” (Heb. 10:28). And so it is under the gospel. Willful apostates forfeiting all their interest in the sacrifice of Christ, there is no relief appointed for them, but God will cut them off and destroy them; as shall, God willing, be declared on that place. And this may be the sense of the words, supposing *ἑαυτοῖς*¹⁵⁷ not to belong originally unto this place. God has confined all hopes of mercy, grace, and salvation unto the “one single offering” and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This our apostle insists on and presses (Heb. 9:25–28; 10:12, 14). Infinite wisdom and sovereign pleasure have centered all grace, mercy, and blessedness in him alone (John 1:14, 16–17; Acts 4:12; Col. 1:19). And this “one offering” of his is so sufficient and effectually powerful unto all that by faith seek an interest therein, that this restraint is no restraint, nor has

¹⁵⁶ Heb. “with a strong hand; presumptuously.”

¹⁵⁷ Gk. “to themselves.”

any sinner the least cause to complain of it. If they reject and despise it, it is their own fault, and at their own peril; nor is it the reiterated sacrifice of the Mass, or whatever else they may betake themselves unto, that will afford them any relief.

But the word (ἑαυτοῖς) is constant enough in ancient copies to maintain its own station, and the context requires its continuance. And this makes the work of “crucifying again” to be the act of the apostates themselves, and to be asserted as that which belongs unto their sin, and not denied as belonging to a relief from their sin. They “crucify him again to themselves.” They do it not really, they cannot do so; but they do it “to themselves” morally. This is in their sin of falling away, part of it comprised in it, which renders it unpardonable; they again crucify the Son of God, not absolutely, but in and to themselves.

How Apostates Crucify the Son of God Again to Themselves

[1] And we must inquire how they did it, or in what sense it is by the apostle charged on them. Now, this (to omit all other things that may be thought to concur herein) was,

{1} Principally by an accession¹⁵⁸ in suffrage¹⁵⁹ unto them who had crucified him once before. Hereby they went over the same work with them, and did that for their own parts which the others had done before for theirs. They approved of and justified the fact of the Jews in crucifying him as a malefactor. For there is no medium between these things. The Lord Christ must be esteemed to be the Son of God, and consequently his gospel to be indispensably obeyed, or be supposed to be justly crucified, as a seducer, a blasphemer, and a malefactor. For professing himself to be the Son of God, and witnessing that confession unto his death, he must be so received or rejected as an evildoer. And this was done by these apostates; for, going over to the Jews, they approved of what they had done in crucifying of him as such a one.

{2} They did it by declaring that having made trial of him, his gospel, and ways, they found nothing of substance, truth, or goodness in them, for which they should continue their profession. Thus that famous or infamous apostate, Julian the emperor, gave this as the motto of his apostasy, ἀνέγνωμεν, ἔγνωμεν, κατέγνωμεν, “I have read, known, and condemned” your gospel. And this has been the way of apostates in all ages. In the primitive times they were the Gentiles’ intelligencers,¹⁶⁰ and like the spies of old brought up a false report

¹⁵⁸ I.e., agreement; admittance; approach.

¹⁵⁹ I.e., the right to vote.

¹⁶⁰ I.e., spies.

upon the land;¹⁶¹ for they were not satisfied (for the most part) to declare their disapprobation¹⁶² of what was really taught, believed, and practiced among the Christians, but the more to countenance their apostasy, not only invidiously¹⁶³ represented and odiously¹⁶⁴ traduced¹⁶⁵ what was really professed, but withal¹⁶⁶ invented lies and calumnies¹⁶⁷ about conspiracies, seditions, and inconsistencies with public peace among them, so if it were possible, to ruin the whole interest and all that belonged unto it. This is to crucify Christ afresh, and to put him to open shame. And such is the manner of them unto this day. If any have made an accession to the more intimate duties of religion, as prayer and preaching by virtue of spiritual gifts with other acts of mutual spiritual communion, which the generality of men concern not themselves in; when in compliance with their occasions and temptations they fall from them and renounce them, they aim at nothing more than by malicious, scurrilous¹⁶⁸ representations of them, and false additions unto them of things perverse or ridiculous, to expose them to open shame and ignominy.¹⁶⁹ Their language is, ἀνέγνωμεν, ἔγνωμεν, κατέγνωμεν; “We have known and tried these things, and declare their folly”; so hoping to be believed, because of their pretended experience, which alone is sufficient to render them suspected with all persons of wisdom and sobriety. Now no man living can attempt a higher dishonor against Jesus Christ, in his person, or in any of his ways, than openly to profess that upon trial of them, they find nothing in them for which they should be desired. But it had been better for such persons “not to have known the way of righteousness, than after they have known it, to turn aside from the holy commandment delivered unto them.”¹⁷⁰

And this is the first aggravation of the sin mentioned, taken from the act ascribed unto the sinners, they “crucify him again”; they do it as much as in them lies, and declare that they would actually do it, if it were in their power. He adds another from the consideration of the person who was thus treated by them. It was the “Son of God” whom they dealt thus withal. This they did, not when he had emptied himself, and made himself of no reputation,

¹⁶¹ Num. 13:31–33.

¹⁶² I.e., disapproval; condemnation.

¹⁶³ I.e., enviously.

¹⁶⁴ I.e., in a disgusting or highly offensive way.

¹⁶⁵ I.e., shamed.

¹⁶⁶ I.e., also.

¹⁶⁷ I.e., false, malicious, and slanderous statements (meant to ruin the reputation of someone or something).

¹⁶⁸ I.e., extremely or obscenely abusive.

¹⁶⁹ I.e., disgrace; dishonor; public contempt.

¹⁷⁰ 2 Pet. 2:21.

so that it was not an easy matter to look through all the veils of his outward weakness and condition in this world, to behold “his glory, as the glory of the only-begotten of the Father”¹⁷¹ in which state he was crucified by the Jews; but now when he had been declared to be “the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead,”¹⁷² and his divinity was variously attested unto in the world and among themselves; and this is the great aggravation of sin against the gospel, namely, of unbelief; that it is immediately against “the Son of God.” His person is despised in it, both absolutely and in the discharge of all his offices; and therefore is God himself so, because he has nothing to do with us but by his Son.

Secondly, the apostle adds, as another aggravation of their sin, καὶ παραδειγματίζοντας, “exposing him again to public ignominy or shame.” Παραδειγματίζω¹⁷³ is to bring any supposed offenders unto such open punishment as is shameful in the eyes of men, and renders them vile who are so traduced and punished. The word is but once more used in the New Testament (namely, Matt. 1:19), where it is spoken of Joseph in reference unto his espoused wife, the holy Virgin: Μὴ θέλων αὐτὴν παραδειγματῖσαι. “Not willing to make her a public example”; that is, by bringing of her forth unto a shameful punishment for the terror of others.

According unto this sense, our apostle, expressing the death of Christ as inflicted by men, reduces the evils that accompanied it unto two heads: {1} the pain of it, and {2} the shame: “He endured the cross and despised the shame” (Heb. 12:2). For as the death of the cross was penal, or painful and dolorous,¹⁷⁴ so in the manner of it, in all its circumstances of time, place, person, it was most highly shameful. He was in it παραδειγματισθεῖς, “ignominiously traduced,” or put to an open shame; yea, the death of the cross among all people was peculiarly shameful. Thus in calling over his death in this place, he refers it unto the same heads of suffering and shame; “crucifying” him, and putting him to an open “shame.” And in this latter he was not spared by these apostates no more than in the former, so far as it lay in their power.

How Apostates Commit a Greater Sin than Christ's Earthly Crucifixion

[2] And hence we may raise a sufficient answer unto an objection of no small importance that arises against our exposition of this place. For it may be said, “That if those, or many of them, or any of them, who actually and really

¹⁷¹ John 1:14.

¹⁷² Rom. 1:4.

¹⁷³ Gk. “to disgrace publicly; to hold up to contempt.”

¹⁷⁴ I.e., grievous; mournful; causing sorrow or pain.

‘crucified’ the Son of God in his own person, and put him to open shame, did yet obtain mercy and pardon of that and all other sins, as it is confessed they did; whence is it that those who renounce him, and do so crucify him and put him to shame only ‘metaphorically,’ and to themselves, should be excluded from all hopes of repentance and pardon?”

I answer, that the sin of those who forsake Christ and the gospel, after their conviction of its truth, and profession of it, is on many accounts far greater than that of those who crucified him in the days of his flesh. And there are sundry reasons whereon God will exercise more severity toward this latter sort of sinners than toward the former.

The sin is greater, because [it is] no way to be extenuated¹⁷⁵ by ignorance. This is everywhere allowed as that which made the sin of [the] crucifying of Christ pardonable upon their repentance, and their repentance possible. So Peter, in his sermon to them, lays down this as the foundation of his exhortation unto repentance: “And now brethren, I wot¹⁷⁶ that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers” (Acts 3:17). “Had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8), which our apostle pleads also in his own case (1 Tim. 1:13). This put their sin among the number of those which sacrifices were allowed for of old, and which fell under the care of him who knows how to have compassion on the “ignorant,” and them that are out of the way.

Apostasy Is Always Willful Obstinacy

[3] But it may be inquired, “How ‘they’ could be excused by ignorance, who had so many means and evidences of conviction as to the truth of his person, that he was the Messiah; and of his doctrine, that it was from heaven. For besides the concurrent testimony of ‘Moses’ and the ‘prophets’ given unto him, the holiness of his person and life, the efficacy of his doctrine, and the evidence of his miracles, did abundantly prove and confirm the truth of those things; so that they could be no otherwise ignorant but by wilful obstinacy.”

Answer {1} First, these were indeed such means of conviction, as that their sin and unbelief against them had no real excuse, as himself everywhere expresses (John 15:22; 12:47–48; 10:36–38). Secondly, nothing is allowed unto this ignorance, but that it left their repentance possible, and their sin pardonable. Thirdly, this it will do, until God has used all the means of conviction which he intends, and no longer. This as yet he had not done. He had yet two

¹⁷⁵ I.e., reduced.

¹⁷⁶ I.e., know.

farther testimonies unto the truth, which he would graciously afford. 1st, his resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1:4), which was always afterward pleaded as the principal evidence of God's approbation¹⁷⁷ of him. 2nd, the effusion of the Holy Spirit in his miraculous operations (Acts 2:32–33; 5:32; 1 Tim. 3:16). But where at any time God has granted all the means of conviction that he pleases, be they ordinary or extraordinary, if they are rejected, there is no hope (Luke 16:29–31). On the other side, this sin of rejecting Christ and the gospel after profession is absolutely willful, and with a high hand, against all the light and conviction that God will give of the truth unto any of the children of men in this world.

{2} These persons had an experience of the truth, goodness, and excellency of the gospel, which those others had not, nor could have; for they had “tasted of the good Word of God, and the powers of the world to come,”¹⁷⁸ and had received great satisfaction in the things they were convinced of, as was before at large declared. Wherefore in their rejection of him and them, an unconquerable hatred and malice must be granted to be predominant. And let men take heed what they do when they begin to sin against their own experience, for evil lies at the door.

{3} In and under the crucifying of the Lord Christ, God had yet a design of mercy and grace to be communicated unto men by the dispensation of his Spirit. Therefore, there was a way set open unto those who were guilty of that sin, to repentance and pardon. But now, having made use of this also, that being sinned against, there is no place left for anything but severity. Wherefore,

{4} There was in the sin of these persons “blasphemy against the Holy Ghost”; for they had received in themselves, or seen in others, those mighty operations of his whereby he gave attestation unto Christ and the gospel. Therefore, they could not renounce the Lord Christ, without an ascription of these works of the Holy Ghost unto the devil, which the devil acted them unto. So says our apostle, “No man speaking by the Holy Ghost calleth Jesus anathema,” or accursed (1 Cor. 12:3). To call him “anathema” is to declare and avow that he was justly crucified as an accursed person, as a public pest. This was done by these persons who went over to the Jews, in approbation of what they had done against him. This no man can do speaking by the Holy Ghost. That is, whosoever does so, is acted by the spirit of the devil; and if he has known the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the contrary, he does it in despite of him, which renders the sin irremissible.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ I.e., official approval or commendation.

¹⁷⁸ Heb. 6:5.

¹⁷⁹ I.e., unpardonable.