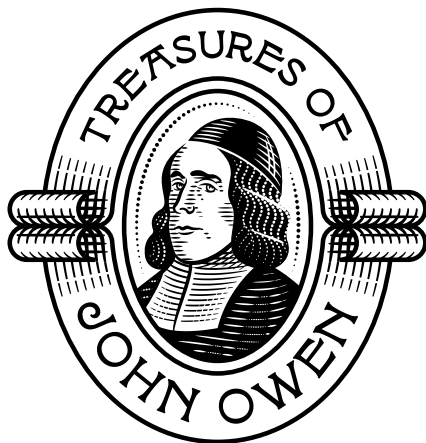


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Wisdom Everywhere
Introducing the
Treasures of John Owen Box Set

Sinclair B. Ferguson



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Wisdom Everywhere

Introducing the *Treasures of John Owen* Box Set

JOHN OWEN

Born in 1616, he died in 1683.

He was: the son of an Anglican minister, a student at the University of Oxford, a private chaplain and educator, a minister of two Church of England congregations, a dissenter, a frequent preacher before the English Parliament, the Dean of Christ Church College (Oxford), the Vice-Chancellor (in United States terms, the President) of Oxford University, a university preacher, an adviser of Oliver Cromwell, the friend and counsellor of several of the grandees of the New Model Army, the pastor of what were essentially ‘underground’ house churches, occasionally arrested, a London minister, the father of eleven children all of whom predeceased him, a widower who remarried. He lived through the English Civil Wars, the execution of King Charles I, the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, the failed rule of his son Richard, and the restoration of the monarchy. His final ministry was to a congregation of around 200 members in London. And – as he is best known today – in the midst of such a varied

life in turbulent times – he was a voluminous author (his collected works, edited in the nineteenth century by William Goold, extend to twenty-four volumes of around 600 pages each).

This was John Owen.

The seven million words Owen wrote during his lifetime cover a wide variety of topics. When William Goold edited them in the nineteenth century, he divided them neatly into a ‘library’ of five shelves: Doctrinal, Practical, Controversial, Historical, and Exegetical. While a number of Owen’s works were called forth by the circumstances of the seventeenth century, all of them continue – at least in part – to have a relevance for the church in every age. Some of them are, however, largely controversial, or academic in nature – he was, after all, a massively able intellectual. But within this impressive library we find a series of books that express what lay deepest in his heart. As David Clarkson, his assistant in the last two years of his life, and no mean theologian himself, told his congregation a few days after Owen’s death:

Holiness gave a divine lustre to his other accomplishments, it shined in his whole course, and was diffused through his whole conversation [*i.e.* lifestyle]. I need not tell you of this that knew him and observed that it was his great design to promote holiness in the power, life, and exercise of it among you.

In other words, whatever else he accomplished in life, his central vision was to help Christians ‘comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses

knowledge' and thus 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Eph. 3:18, 19; 2 Pet. 3:18).

The John Owen 'Library'

In recent decades, several of Owen's works have been edited and published in paperback format to make them more readily accessible into Christians in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Now, in this beautifully produced box set, the 'Treasures of John Owen,' they are being republished in hardback format arranged in five volumes. Within this box set readers will find themselves entering a world of biblical, doctrinal, pastoral and spiritual instruction that is not only accessible to them, but also leads them into a fresh understanding of the greatness of the gospel – what Paul describes as the four-dimensional love of God for us in Christ ('breadth and length, height and depth') – and its many practical implications Here then is a collection of books designed to enable us to *grow* in both knowledge and grace.

The Early Years

As far as we know, Owen left behind no personal journal, and certainly no autobiography. Indeed, while the general outline of his life is clear enough, he has given his biographers over the centuries some major challenges in piecing together its details. What is clear enough is that for all he was a man of letters he was also a man of action. So while readers will be chiefly interested in simply reading the books in this library, it may be of interest, and indeed helpful, to retell the story of his life and notice how these volumes (and others) emerged from his study.

John Owen was born into the home of Henry and Hester Owen in the vicarage of Stadhampton some ten miles from Oxford. His father, he later wrote, was 'a non-conformist all his days.' In all likelihood, then, as Calvin wrote about Timothy, the young John 'drank in godliness with his mother's milk.' By the age of twelve he was already studying at the University of Oxford, graduating B.A. at the age of fifteen or sixteen in 1632. He continued his studies until 1637 – this was the decade of the ascendancy of William Laud and his vigorous pursuit of anti-Puritan policies, and Oxford was no place for someone with Owen's convictions. Laud had been appointed Chancellor of the University in 1630 and Archbishop of Canterbury three years later.

Leaving Oxford then, barely out of his teenage years, Owen took 'employment' – as many young graduates were able to do – as a private chaplain in the home of Sir William Dormer in Buckinghamshire and later with Lord Lovelace in Berkshire. When the first Civil War erupted, Lovelace supported the royalist side and in 1642 Owen moved to London.

It was during this time in London that, famously, Owen went to hear Edmund Calamy preach at the church of St Mary Aldermanbury. He entered a medieval church building with a fascinating subsequent history.¹ It was in this old church that Owen came to an assurance of his own salvation – but it was not through the preaching of the illustrious

¹ Destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666 it was rebuilt, but destroyed again in 1940 in the London Blitz. Its stones were then, remarkably, transported to the U.S.A. and rebuilt into the chapel of Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri as a memorial to Sir Winston Churchill (the national Churchill Museum is located on the College's campus).

Edmund Calamy! Instead an unidentified preacher entered the pulpit to expound the words of Matthew 8:26: ‘Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?’ If ever a message was tailored to Owen’s need it was apparently this one. It is not surprising that the context of the question – the stilling of the storm – became a recurring motif in his own preaching and writing. Indeed, as we shall see, some of his last recorded words allude to it.

Young Author

Owen’s first venture into print soon followed in 1643. He was an aspiring young puritan-inclined theologian of his day. The book’s title tells all: *A Display of Arminianism*. In it he systematically examined the fundamental doctrines which Laud and his cohorts had espoused, and sought to destroy their impact by an exposition of biblical truth. In the conflict (his Latin title was *Theomachia* – *machē* is the Greek word for battle!) he planted his own standard well and truly on the ground of man’s depravity and the bondage of his will, God’s sovereign predestination and irresistible grace, and the efficacy of Christ’s atoning work – themes to which he would continue to return in his later writings.

Pastoral Ministry

Clearly now a rising figure, he was appointed to his first charge at Fordham in Essex, and in 1643 married Mary Rooke. Together they had eleven children, only one of whom survived into adulthood. Here, in Fordham, his writings took on a more pastoral tone. He gave expression to his non-conformist views on the organisation of the church in a work outlining the responsibilities of its ministers and

members and he wrote catechisms for both the children and the adults in his congregation.

By the time he was thirty he had already preached the first of his sermons to the House of Commons and in 1646 was appointed vicar of the much larger congregation in Coggeshall, also in Essex. Already developing the conviction that the way ahead for the Puritan vision was to establish gathered churches which would function virtually in parallel with the life of the parish church, in 1648 he published the first book in this 'library,' *Duties of Christian Fellowship* (originally entitled *Eschol; or Rules of Direction for the Walking of the Saints in Fellowship*).

Here we find an illustration of an important principle in reading John Owen: you do not need to agree with him on either the details of his views on church government, or even non-conformity for that matter, to appreciate the wisdom of his teaching. His associate in later life, David Clarkson, indicated that only necessity led Owen into controversies, and certainly Owen himself wisely saw the danger of focusing on differences to the extent that we lose sight of our much more significant agreement on the essentials of the gospel. That said, he maintained very firm convictions about what those essentials were – and indeed that they were absolutely *essential*. In this work he provides a whole series of 'rules' to guide church life. Today we might find the term 'principles' more user-friendly. But by whatever name we call them, if put into practice, they would wonderfully transform any church family, indeed any form of organised Christian fellowship. This work would make a wonderful study for elders and church leaders as well as for members in general.

John Owen

The Spirit and the Church

Duties of Christian Fellowship



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The Spirit and the Church

Abridged and made easy to read by

R. J. K. Law

Contents

<i>Publisher's Preface</i>	xi
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Part 1

How We Believe Scripture to Be the Word of God

1. Illumination Based on Revelation	3
2. The Faith by Which We Believe Scripture to be God's Word	11
3. External Arguments for Divine Revelation	15
4. Moral Certainty, the Result of External Arguments, Insufficient	21
5. Divine Revelation Itself the Only Foundation and Reason for Faith	35
6. The Self-Evidencing Power of Scripture	43
7. The Kind of Assurance Scripture Brings	53

Part 2

Understanding the Mind of God

1. How We Learn the Mind of God from Scripture	63
2. Knowing the Mind of God: Some Teaching from Scripture Itself	67

THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH

3.	How are Believers Guided into 'All Truth'?	73
4.	How Does the Holy Spirit Enlighten Our Minds?	81
5.	Hindrances to the Understanding of the Mind of God in Scripture	85
6.	The Nature of Scripture, and the Right Approach to It	91
7.	Means to be Used to Understand the Mind of God in Scripture	97
8.	Tools from Various Disciplines to Aid in Our Understanding of Scripture	99
9.	Help from the Church to Understand Scripture	101
10.	Final Points on the Work of the Spirit in Relation to Scripture	105

Part 3 **The Holy Spirit and Prayer**

1.	The Help of the Spirit in Prayer	111
2.	The Spirit of Grace and Supplication: Zechariah 12:10 Expounded	113
3.	The Spirit of Adoption: Galatians 4:6 Expounded	121
4.	The Nature of Prayer: Romans 8:26 Vindicated	125
5.	The Spirit Teaches Us What to Pray For	129
6.	The Spirit Teaches Us How to Pray	137
7.	The Duty of Praying in the Spirit: Ephesians 6:18 Expounded	143
8.	The Spirit Enables Us to Pray Aloud	147

9. Our Response to the Gift of the Spirit of Prayer	155
10. Contemplative Prayer Considered	163
11. Set Forms of Prayer Examined	171

Part 4

The Holy Spirit as a Comforter

1. How the Spirit Comforts the Church	181
2. The Characteristics of the Spirit's Work as Comforter	187
3. The Holy Spirit Comforts Only Believers	193
4. The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit	195
5. The Holy Spirit as an Anointing	201
6. The Holy Spirit Seals Believers	207
7. The Holy Spirit as an Earnest or Guarantee	213

Part 5

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

1. The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts	219
2. Spiritual Gifts and Saving Grace	221
3. The Extraordinary Offices of the Church	227
4. Extraordinary Spiritual Gifts in the Church	231
5. How Spiritual Gifts Promote Christ's Kingdom	237
6. The Continuance of the Ministry	241

THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 7. Spiritual Gifts Granted to the Ministry | 245 |
| 8. The Gifts of the Spirit for Doctrine, Worship
and Discipline | 249 |

Publisher's Preface

THE Puritan era in seventeenth-century England was distinguished most of all by its school of evangelical authors whose writings have had such a powerful influence wherever they have been read. Among these men none has been regarded more highly than John Owen, whose works combine biblical insight and theology with spirituality and experimental religion to such a marked degree. As an indication of the value placed upon him by the present publishers it may be noted that the sixteen volumes of his *Works* (in the Goid edition of 1850–53) have been kept in print ever since they were first reprinted in 1965 on account of their importance, and the seven volumes of his exposition of *Hebrews* have been available since 1991. We hope that the availability of the full text of Owen can be continued; the abridgements which are now being issued are not meant as a replacement.

Those who have accused Owen of being hard to read have generally been people who lacked the time to read him as he deserves. But considering the extent of his writings even those who wish to read him more fully have often, for the same reason, been unable to become as familiar with him as they would wish. Many cannot read enough to be able to determine which of his books contain his finest work and there can be few alive who

have read all of his *Works*. As a result many of Owen's most important and relevant treatises are little known today. The Rev. R. J. K. Law, the abridger of this text, began his work purely for his own profit and as a memory aid. As he proceeded, he felt more and more like the men of 2 Kings chapter seven who, discovering the riches of the deserted camp of the Syrians, exclaimed, 'This day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace.' The desire that others should share in his findings thus led to a change in his original purpose.

On examining the quality of Dr Law's abridgements we have fully shared his enthusiasm for putting the best of Owen into the hands of as many readers as possible.

The 'discourses' (to use Owen's term) in this book are all from volume 4 of the sixteen-volume set referred to above. They should be considered as completing what was begun in the abridgement of volume 3, published in the Puritan Paperback series in 1998 as *The Holy Spirit*.¹ In Owen's words, they concern 'the work of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of illumination, of supplication, of consolation and as the immediate author of all spiritual offices and gifts.' This material is vitally important for the well-being of the church today. Parts 1 and 2, on the work of the Spirit in illuminating our minds as to the nature and contents of Scripture, remain as important as when first written, in view of modern views which subordinate Scripture to the Spirit and exalt the 'inner light.' The other discourses are also richly enlightening as to the nature of prayer, spiritual comfort and spiritual gifts, and the work of the Spirit in these. Throughout, the balance Owen maintains between

¹ Also available in clothbound in this box set.

PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

the word and the Spirit, not over- or understating the role of either, is impressive.

The Bible version used throughout is the *New King James Version*. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

For maximum benefit, the reader should look up the Scripture verses cited and consider them in relation to the points Owen is making, with fervent prayer for the grace and help of the Holy Spirit.

Edinburgh, 2002

Part 1

How We Believe Scripture to Be the Word of God

Illumination Based on Revelation

THE work of the Holy Spirit in the illumination or enlightening of the minds of men is the main subject of the discourse on the Holy Spirit of which this is a part. This work of illumination is distinctly described in Scripture (Eph. 1:17, 18; Heb. 6:4; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 16:14; 26:18; 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Pet. 2:9).

The outward means that this illumination is founded on, the Scripture, is the principal topic we will consider in the present discussion, giving particular attention to this question: *What is the basis of our believing the Scripture to be the word of God, with that divine and supernatural faith which is required of us by God, and which it is our duty to give?*

Illumination and revelation

What then is 'illumination'? Illumination is the effect of a divine work wrought in the minds of men enabling them to know the mind and will of God, as supernaturally revealed to them, as the law or rule of their faith, life and obedience.

Supernatural *revelation* is the basis of supernatural *illumination*. These things go together. There is a natural knowledge of supernatural things, which is both theoretical

and practical (Rom. 1:19 and 2:14, 15). And there may be a supernatural knowledge of natural things, as when God gave supernatural wisdom about natural things to Solomon (1 Kings 4:31-34). God also gave Bezalel supernatural wisdom to enable him to build the tabernacle (Exod. 31:2-6). Without this, both Solomon and Bezalel would have had to spend years gaining that knowledge which God gave them supernaturally.

But *supernatural illumination* relates to what has been *supernaturally revealed* and is wrought in us by the immediate power of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:9, 10; Eph. 1:17-19; 2 Cor. 4:6). David prayed for this illumination (Psa. 119:18). 'Open,' 'reveal,' or 'uncover my eyes,' bring light and understanding into my mind, 'that I may see wondrous things from Your law.' As if to say, 'Uncover my eyes that I may see with unveiled face,' or as in the Syriac, 'with a revealed or uncovered face,' 'wondrous things from Your law.' He prayed for inward light, the illumination or enlightening of the mind. The light he prayed for had to do only with the outward doctrine of the law. The writer to the Hebrews declares the nature of God's outward revelations (Heb. 1:1, 2). The various supernatural revelations that he has made of himself, his mind and will, from first to last, are the sole foundation on which the supernatural illumination we are speaking of rests.

This divine external revelation was given by God 'at various times and in various ways' (Heb. 1:1). It came with its own supernatural evidence that it was from God, and this was sufficient to convince the minds of those who received it. When it was preached to others by those who had received it directly from God, a divine power

infallibly assured the hearers that the revelation came from God, so that they were able to resist Satanic delusions, claiming to be divine revelations, preached by false prophets at that time. These evidences accompanying divine revelations were particularly directed to faith, as the Scriptures are, and not to the outward senses.

The evidence we are talking about is not like the sun which proves its own existence by the light that shines from it. We can see it clearly and do not have to assure ourselves by reasoning that it exists. But it is like the evidence that the heavens and the earth give of their being created by the power of God. While they give this evidence undeniably and infallibly (Psa. 19:1, 2; Rom. 1:19-21), yet we are still required to use our reasoning ability to come to the right conclusion as we consider and meditate on them. Where men fail to do this, notwithstanding the clear evidence they have of God's majesty and glory, they degenerate into atheism.

In all his revelations God required men to exercise faith, conscience, obedience and reason towards them. When they did this, they received full assurance that the revelation came from God. God's word differs from all else that claims to be revelation as the wheat does from the chaff (Jer. 23:8). But it is our duty to try to sift the wheat from the chaff.

The revelations which God gave were sufficient to guide and direct all to whom they came in the knowledge of their duty to God. They clearly showed man what God required of him, in the way of faith and obedience.

Each generation had enough light to guide them in faith and obedience. Men had enough knowledge to offer sacrifices in faith as did Abel, enough knowledge to walk

with God as did Enoch, and enough knowledge to teach their families the fear of the Lord, as did Abraham. Enoch was given sufficient revelation to prophesy, warn and instruct others (Jude 14, 15). Noah had sufficient revelation to become a preacher of righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5). Abraham was given sufficient revelation to command his children and household to keep the way of the Lord (Gen. 18:19).

Old and New Testament revelation

Yet these revelations were 'as a light shining in a dark place.' The Old Testament was like a candle in a dark room, or like the stars and the moon on a dark night. When the sun rises, there is no longer any use for the candle, and the moon and the stars fade into insignificance. So when the full glory of the gospel rose and the Sun of righteousness came, the Old Testament types and ceremonies were no longer needed. As we study them, we may yet see the light that was in them, though it is now to us as a candle shining in full daylight.

There was also in the Old Testament a sufficient ministry for the declaration of the revelations which God made of himself and his will. There was the natural ministry of parents who were obliged to instruct their children in the knowledge of the truth which they had received. There was also the extraordinary ministry of those whom God entrusted with new revelations of himself, both to confirm and to give further light on the earlier revelations they had received, even before any divine revelations were recorded in writing.

Insufficiency of unwritten revelation

However, this way of teaching was imperfect and insufficient to retain the knowledge of God in the world. Under this dispensation the generality of men fell into great apostasy from God. So God suffered all nations to walk in their own ways and gave them up to their own hearts' lusts to walk in their own counsels (Acts 14:16; Psa. 81:12). This was because of their wickedness and base ingratitude, but happened all the more easily because there was no certain standard of truth to which men might go. It may be said that since the revelation of the will of God has been committed to writing, men have still apostatized from the knowledge of God. I answer that this has not come about by any defect in the way and means of illumination, nor in the way in which God gave his truth to men, but because of men's wickedness and ingratitude. God has justly given them up to destruction (Rom. 1:18; 2 Thess. 2:11, 12; Luke 13:3).

But now God has gathered up into Scripture all divine revelations given by himself from the beginning of the world, and all that ever shall be to the end of the world, for the general use of the church. This is so that we might be thoroughly instructed in the mind and will of God, be guided aright in worship and obedience here, and be brought to eternal joy hereafter.

When God gave the law and committed it to writing, he forbade any to add to it (Deut. 4:2; 12:32). All further revelations given to the church under the Old Testament were gathered in writing in the later books. When the full revelation of the whole mind of God, to which nothing is

ever to be added, was perfected by Jesus Christ, all was by divine inspiration committed to writing (Heb. 1:1, 2; Luke 1:4; Acts 1:1; John 20:31).

As the Old Testament closed with a warning, so also the New Testament concludes with a warning to any who should presume to add anything more (Mal. 4:4-6; Rev. 22:18).

Therefore, *Scripture is now the only external means of divine spiritual illumination*, because it is the only repository of all divine supernatural revelation (Psa. 19:7, 8; Isa. 8:20; 2 Tim. 3:15-17).

In asserting this, we are not excluding all those subordinate means which God has given to make it do its work effectively in our hearts and souls. We must, of course, read, study and meditate on those things given to us in Scripture (Deut. 6:6, 7; 11:18; Josh. 1:18; Psa. 1:2; 119; Col. 3:16; 2 Tim. 3:15). Bread will nourish no one who does not obtain it and feed on it.

The mutual instruction of one another out of the Scriptures is also required, so that we may communicate to each other the knowledge of the mind of God (Deut. 6:7; Luke 24:26, 27, 32).

The ministry of the word in the church is another important means of making known the mind and will of God (Matt. 5:14, 15; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Eph. 4:11-15; 1 Tim. 3:15).

Now, for Scripture, which contains the whole of divine revelation, to be a sufficient external means of illumination to us, we must first *believe* it to be a divine revelation (2 Pet. 1:19-21; Heb. 1:1; 2 Tim. 3:16; Isa. 8:20; 1 Thess. 2:13; Neh. 8:8; Isa. 28:9; Hos. 14:9; Prov. 1:6; Psa. 119:34; Matt. 15:16; 2 Tim. 2:7; 1 John 5:20). Secondly, we must understand

the things contained in Scripture (Isa. 29: 11, 12; Psa. 119:30; Luke 24:27, 45; Acts 8:31, 34, 35). The first of these is the subject of Part 1 of this book. The latter is the subject of Part 2.

Both of these are to be considered as part of the illumination which is accomplished in us by the Spirit. What I shall affirm in the following discussion is that *it is the work of the Holy Spirit to enable us to believe Scripture to be the word of God, and infallibly to evidence it to be so to our minds, so that we spiritually and savingly rest in it.*

By this I do not mean, as some assume, that faith in Scripture comes from a private, personal revelation given to each person by the Spirit, or any self-deluding claim of that kind, nor do I exclude all rational arguments and external testimonies to Scripture as the word of God.

Indeed we affirm nothing on this subject but what the church, ancient and modern, has always believed.

The Faith by Which We Believe Scripture to be God's Word

WE are considering what it is to believe with a faith which cannot be mistaken that the Scripture is the word of God, and the basis of our doing so. After that, we will consider the fact that there are also external arguments for the divine origin of the Scripture.

As to our believing, two things are to be considered: *what it is that we believe*, and *the reason why we believe it*.

We believe all that is revealed and declared to us in Scripture, and we believe it *because* it is revealed there, not for any external reason (1 Cor. 15:3, 4; Acts 8:28-38; 26:22, 23, 27; John 2:22).

The faith by which we believe Scripture to be the word of God is not any kind of faith or persuasion, but that which is *divine and infallible*. It must be so because what causes it and what it is based on is divine and infallible. As in the case of the Samaritans, our faith may begin with the testimony of men, but it must progress to that which is of God and therefore cannot be mistaken (John 4:40-42).

When we speak of faith that is infallible we are not referring to some inherent quality in the person who believes,

as if he were infallible. What we are saying is that the assent our minds give to divine truths or supernatural revelations is different from every other kind of assent, and this is because the evidence on which it is based is from God and is infallible.

That the Scripture is the word of God is infallibly true, but men may believe this for a fallible reason, from tradition, or on the testimony of the church only, or from outward arguments. This leads only to a natural, human faith. For the kind of faith we are speaking of, it is not enough that the thing believed is infallibly true. There also has to be infallible evidence that it is so, on the basis of which we believe. Then our faith is infallible, though we ourselves are fallible.

This was the case with those who received divine revelations immediately from God. It was not enough that the things revealed were infallibly true. Those who received them also had to have infallible evidence of the revelation itself. Then their faith was infallible, though they were fallible. With this kind of faith a man can believe nothing but what is divinely true. The truthfulness of God – the God of truth (Deut. 32:4) – is the only foundation on which it rests. That faith which is in God and his word is *fixed on truth*, or is infallible (2 Chron. 20:20).

This faith therefore rests only on the authority and truthfulness of God, who has spoken in Scripture (Deut. 32:4; Titus 1:2; John 17:17; 1 John 5:6).

Faith supernatural, infallible and divine

Our faith is supernatural because it is produced in our minds by the Holy Spirit. It is infallible because the only thing it rests on is infallible divine revelation. And it is divine, as