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Owen's Doctrine of Preparation For Grace and Glory

John Owen and His Influence

John Owen (1616–1683), pastor, preacher to Parliament, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, is widely regarded as the greatest British theologian of all time, though his name recognition today among evangelical Christians falls far short of what he well deserves. While his theological works, ultimately comprising 24 volumes in William Goold's edition of 1850–53, exerted considerable influence in British and American church circles for roughly a century and three quarters following his death, their nineteenth-century shift from Reformed theology to Arminianism and even liberalism diminished his influence and effectively consigned his massive corpus of divinity, including his magisterial theology of the Holy Spirit, to the ash heap of history.

This regrettable state of affairs began to change, however, with the renewed interest in Reformed theology in English-speaking countries catalyzed by the ministries of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) and Dr. James Innell Packer (1926–) who founded in 1952 the Puritan Studies Conference, now known as the Westminster Conference.

The Banner of Truth Trust, a British publishing house founded in 1957, republished Goold's edition of Owen's collected works in 1968. Then followed Peter Toon's biography *God's Statesman: Life and Work of John Owen* (1971) and Sinclair B. Ferguson's *John Owen on the Christian Life* (1987). Packer's Puritan Conference addresses on Owen's theology,

published in 1991 as *Among God's Giants* in the U.K. and *A Quest for Godliness* in the U.S., were also pivotal in exposing a wider audience to Owen's incredibly rich, comprehensive, and incisive theology. Since then, Owen scholarship has advanced with the publication of several published doctoral theses: Randall G. Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification* (1995), Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (2002), and Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen* (2002).

Gleason entered the "Calvin vs. the Calvinists" fray started by R.T. Kendall's *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (1979) by concluding that Owen's theology of mortification exhibited continuity with Calvin's by "maintain[ing] a tension between the unconditional and conditional dimensions of the covenant [of grace]." ¹ Rehnman insisted that Owen's Protestant scholastic theology, though more Christ-centered and less metaphysical, resembled medieval scholasticism more than early Reformed theology. This study has found substantial solidarity regarding the doctrine of preparation for grace, however, between Owen and other mainstream Puritans with the teaching of Martin Luther and John Calvin.

John Owen's Theology

John Owen's theology, breath-taking in architectonic grandeur and scope, powerfully depicts the broad sweep of the interaction between gracious divine initiative and human responsibility in Christian salvation, conceived as preparation for both grace and glory. His treatment of the bond of the grace and duty fleshes out, with wonderful depth and clarity, the injunction given by Paul in Philippians 3:12–13 to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you both to will and to perform His good pleasure."

Owen's holistic treatment of preparation for grace and glory carries an urgent message for today's church. Significantly, he clears up the modern confusion between the meritorious preparationism of late Roman Catholic medieval theology (nominalism) and the gracious preparation for grace

¹ Randall C. Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification of Sin: A Comparative Study in Reformed Spirituality* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 158. Similarly, this study will cast serious doubt on Gavin McGrath's assessment that Owen's theology regarding the conditionality of the covenant of grace was contradictory. Gavin McGrath, *Puritans and the Human Will: Voluntarism within Mid-Seventeenth Century English Puritanism in Richard Baxter and John Owen*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Durham, 1989.

championed by Luther, Calvin and the Puritans. The Puritans, including Owen (widely regarded as their best theologian), taught the Christian duty of putting oneself “in the way of salvation” while upholding the primacy of God’s grace in drawing the seeker to Himself.

Highly instructive is Owen’s distinction (one shared by John Bunyan) between absolute and conditional promises whereby, for example, God’s absolute promise of preservation guarantees the Christian’s fulfillment of the conditional promise of perseverance. Owen also highlighted the vital importance of the preparatory work of the law in Christian conversion, because he considers conviction of sin necessary to conversion. By recovering these three crucial emphases of historic Reformed theology, Owen rescues the modern-day Reformed pastor and Christian from the false dilemma, observed by Packer, of pursuing evangelism either Arminian-style or not at all:

[There is] a widespread uncertainty about the evangelistic implications of the Reformed faith. Many today ...see the scripturalness of the doctrine of grace...but do not see how ... one can preach evangelistically. If the doctrines of total inability, unconditional election and effectual calling are true—if, that is, sinners cannot of themselves turn to God, and faith and repentance are graces given only to the elect—what sense does it make to command all men indiscriminately to repent and believe?²

Equally important, Owen’s comprehensive treatment of salvation stresses the importance of using the means of grace (including Christian obedience) for Christian sanctification (preparation for glory). His theology is a clarion call to the modern church to escape from its pervasive cocoon of the cheap-grace (antinomian) theology that is destroying its spiritual power and evangelistic witness.

The Puritan Doctrine of Preparation For Grace

The Puritan doctrine of preparation for grace is often misrepresented by modern scholars, and even modern Reformed theologians, as preparationism or crypto-Arminianism. Preparationism, a product of late medieval Roman Catholic nominalism, is the view that man is able to prepare himself for grace and that God becomes obligated to confer further grace upon whoever has done his best to prepare.³ The Puritan view of prepara-

² J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Westchester, IL.: Crossway, 1990), 165.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: Reformation of Church and Dogma* (1300–1700) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 380–81.

tion denies any meritorious or self- preparation that God has to reward with regeneration. Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), for example, declared that his sermons most blessed with conversions during the Great Awakening were those insisting that God in His absolute sovereignty was not obligated to save unregenerate seekers.⁴ Conversely, the Puritan concept of preparation is that a person must usually take certain steps, in diligent exercise of God's appointed means of grace, to prepare himself for grace and glory. As the Puritans put it, a person was to put himself "in the way of" salvation because God's normal (though not invariable) method was to graciously reward those with salvation who diligently sought him through the means of grace.

Preparation for grace is not a Puritan innovation but can be traced back to Martin Luther (1517–1546), who considers that the "emphatically necessary and serious" preparatory work of the law enlightens the unregenerate to face up to their delusion of spiritual freedom, the stark reality of their bondage to sin, and their desperate need for Christ:

But the Scripture sets before us a man who is not only bound, wretched, captive and sick but who, through the operation of Satan, his lord, adds to his miseries that of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, possessed of liberty, whole and alive... Christ was sent 'to preach the gospel to the poor, and to heal the broken-hearted.' Hence the work of Satan is to hold men so that they do not recognize their own wretchedness. But the work of Moses the lawgiver is the opposite of this—namely, through the law to lay open to man his own wretchedness, so that, by thus breaking him down, and confounding him in his self-knowledge, he may make him ready for grace, and send him to Christ to be saved. Therefore, the function prepared by the law is nothing to laugh at, but is most emphatically necessary and serious.⁵

Richard A. Muller, when defining the Reformed understanding of *praeparatio ad conversionem*, notes the prevalence of a very similar concept in Lutheran theology, that of the terrified conscience:

⁴ "No discourses have been more remarkably blessed than those in which the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty with regard to the salvation of sinners, and his just liberty with regard to answering prayers, or succeeding the pains of natural men, continuing such, have been insisted on. Romans 3:19 shows that it would be just with God for ever to reject and cast off mere natural men" (Jonathan Edwards, "The Great Awakening," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. C. C. Goen [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972], 4:168).

⁵ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. James I. Packer and O.R. Johnston (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Revell, 1957), 162.

A term used in Reformed dogmatics, particularly by the English, to indicate the terror of heart, the deep remorse, and the fear of hell brought on by the elenctical [pedagogical] use of the law that precede conversion and can be viewed as a preparatory work of the Spirit, which subdues pride and opens the will for grace. The Reformed are anxious to preserve their doctrine from synergism and argue that *praeparatio* is itself a work of grace, an *actus praeparatorius*, or preparatory work, an *actus praecedens*, or work preceding, that involves the inward life of sinners but does not constitute a human merit. Among the Lutherans this *praeparatio* is referred to under the terms *terrores conscientiae*.⁶

Despite ample precedent established by Luther and John Calvin (1509–1564), as discussed below, the doctrine of preparation for grace, though deeply developed and evangelistically potent during the Puritan era, has fallen into modern obscurity and found little, if any, place in modern Reformed theology. Several historical reasons seem to account for this ominous neglect, which has arguably stunted true conversion growth in American and British Commonwealth churches.

(1) Arminianism, ascendant in modern evangelical theology, has no place for preparation for grace because the latter concept implies that conversion is usually a more gradual process.⁷ Arminian theology stresses the freedom of the will and a merely persuasive role of the Holy Spirit in conversion, whereas Reformed theology, as reflected in the Westminster Confession, stresses the bondage of the will and transformative power of the Holy Spirit renewing human faculties in conversion.⁸ In short, Reformed theology views conversion as a more “violent” event in which the unbeliever is weaned from his natural love affair with sin.⁹ Modern evangelical

⁶ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 237.

⁷ John H. Gerstner and John N. Gerstner, “Edwardsean Preparation for Salvation,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 42 (1979): 67.

⁸ Westminster Confession section 9.4 (Of Free Will) states in part, “When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he frees him from his natural bondage under sin, and by his grace alone enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good.” Section 10.1. (Of Effectual Calling) declares in part: “All those whom God has predestined to life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death..., enlightening their minds;...giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills....”

⁹ J. I. Packer, *Quest*, 40–41: “The occasionally voiced suggestion that there was something legalistic in their stress on the need for a ‘preparatory work’ of contrition and humbling for sin before men can close with Christ is false; the only point they were making... was that, because fallen man is naturally in love with

theology considers conversion a relatively easy work, whereas the Puritans marked the difficulty of conversion.¹⁰ An Arminian believes that anyone can be saved at any time, whereas the Reformed view, again as represented by the Westminster Confession, is that God saves only His elect and does so in His “due season” or “appointed and accepted time.”¹¹ Consequently, Reformed evangelists have a sense of urgency about encouraging conversion to take place during seasons of grace when God may be wooing the sinner.

(2) There is widespread confusion between the Puritan doctrine of preparation for grace and the concept of preparationism espoused by medieval Roman Catholic nominalists. William of Ockham (1285–1349) and Gregory Biel (ca.1425–1495) believed that, “In accordance with God’s gracious goodness, he who does his best in a state of nature receives grace as a fitting reward.”¹² As Harvard historian Steven Ozment analyzes it, nominalism held to a four-stage process of salvation:

1. Moral effort: doing the best one can on the basis of natural moral ability;
2. Infusion of grace as an appropriate reward;
3. Moral cooperation: doing the best one can with the aid of grace; and
4. Reward of eternal life as a just due.¹³

The Protestant Reformers and mainstream Puritans objected to the medieval nominalist concept of preparationism because it made preparation for grace meritorious, thereby placing God in man’s debt.

sin, it is psychologically impossible for him to embrace Christ whole-heartedly as a Saviour, not just from sin’s penalty but from sinning itself, until he has come to hate sin and long for deliverance from it. The ‘preparatory work’ is simply the creating of this state of mind.”

¹⁰ Thomas Hooker’s treatise, *The Sincere Convert* (1643), is subtitled in part “The Great Difficulty of Saving Conversion.” Owen observes that many, upon “beginning a serious closing with Christ find it a work of difficulty and tediousness to flesh and blood” (*Works*, 9:28). Thomas Watson (ca.1620–1686) declares, “The fourth bar in the way to salvation is an [erroneous] view of the easiness of salvation. Is regeneration easy? Are not there pangs in the new birth? Is self-denial easy?” (*Select Works of Thomas Watson* [Morgantown, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990 reprint], 1:378).

¹¹ Westminster Confession sections 3.6 and 10.1.

¹² Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform* (1250–1550) (Yale University Press: New Haven (1980), 234. For more background, see Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 374–85.

¹³ *Ibid.*

(3) There is a prevalent fear in Reformed circles that the doctrine of preparation betrays crypto-Arminianism. Harvard scholar Perry Miller led the charge by asserting that "It was but a short step from such thinking to an open reliance upon human exertions and to a belief that conversion is worked entirely by rational argument and moral persuasion."¹⁴ Yet this study will argue that preparation is simply the acknowledgment that God in His Providence almost always utilizes means—including the preparatory work of the law—in the salvation of His people; to quote the John Gerstners: "All Reformed theology always maintained that God himself prepares the elect [who are still] unregenerate for regeneration through his providential disposition of the means of grace."¹⁵

Calvin versus the Calvinists?

The doctrine of conversion occupied a central place in Puritan piety. As Packer observed, "The elaborate practical 'handling' of the subject of conversion in Puritan books was regarded by the rest of the seventeenth-century Protestant world as something of unique value."¹⁶ The work of an entire generation of Puritan scholars centered on the Puritan doctrine of conversion and its continuity or discontinuity with Calvinism. David D. Hall observed in 1987 that, "Certain issues, especially the role and nature of conversion and the relationship between Calvinism and Puritanism, remain the vital center of Puritan studies."¹⁷ In 1979, R. T. Kendall asserted, given Calvin's sudden conversion,¹⁸ that Calvin denied the necessity of preparation and any preparatory work of the law. Kendall writes:

Calvin's position... rules out any preparation for faith on man's part.... But not only that; there is nothing in Calvin's doctrine that suggests, even

¹⁴ Perry Miller, "Preparation for Salvation in Seventeenth-Century New England," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4 (1943): 286. R. T. Kendall, discussed below, has adopted Miller's view.

¹⁵ Gerstner and Gerstner, "Edwardsean Preparation," 6.

¹⁶ Packer, *Quest*, 292, quoting the contemporary observations of Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680) and Philip Nye (ca.1596–1672) to this effect.

¹⁷ David D. Hall, "On Common Ground: The Coherence of American Puritan Studies," *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (1987): 195.

¹⁸ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism until 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 21. Kendall's conclusions have been controversial and disputed. See Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 60. Helm concludes that Calvin, the Puritan divines and the Westminster Confession all teach "preparation for faith, but not self-preparation."