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TITLE

"John Owen and the Westminster Confession of Faith. An examination of the issue of freedom as it pertains to the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the conversion, regeneration, faith, sanctification, assurance and perseverance of the believer."

Submitted by:

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SUMMARY

For many, the Westminster Confession of Faith is a document that stands above criticism and is considered to be almost so inspired that one is bound by its view and cannot call its doctrine into question. To a lesser extent, those who revere John Owen, feel that his systematic writings are without comparison, and that there has been no fuller exposition of the Christian faith.

When I started to examine the whole issue of freedom and the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, I wanted to honestly examine the weaknesses of the Confession and John Owen's doctrine. However, as I progressed in my study (i) began to ask myself whether Owen and the Confession had really captured the essential message of the Christian faith by what they centrally and primarily emphasises in their theology. What i began to see was not just a weakness in certain areas of their thinking, but a fatal flaw that affected the whole of their theology. The more I studied certain essential parts of the Confession and Owen, I began to wonder if what I was reading was in fact authentic Christian doctrine or a perversion that verged on heresy!

The basic role of the Holy Spirit in Owen and the Confession is to carry out irresistibly, effectually and efficaciously the predetermined, elective will of God. The Spirit applies the benefits of a limited atonement to those whom it pleases God to save, passing by the rest of mankind altogether. The Spirit then converts, regenerates, bestows faith, sanctifies in a definitive and progressive sense, but is unable or unwilling to grant either immediate or eventual assurance.

What makes this whole scheme of theology so difficult to accept as authentically Christian is the lack of assurance that is experience by those believers who are subjected to it. This lack of assurance comes as a direct result of the believer not knowing whether or not they are loved by God. Faith and assurance are not found together. What is even worse is the claims by both Owen and the Confession that assurance is not immediate upon faith, and in some cases may never happen. This can only lead to uncertainty, doubt, despair and eventually justification by works.

To summarise: both Owen and the Confession propound theologies that are slaves to double predestinarianism. The role of the Spirit is merely to work among the elect, the will of God. The result is a theological system that limits the love of God and damages the faith of believers.

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HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Puritanism finds its roots in Calvinism and Calvinism was a response which sought to re-affirm afresh the authentic gospel. It would be true to say that the compilers of the Westminster Confession and John Owen stood firmly in this tradition.

Up until the time of the Reformation, within the Church the main point of controversy with regard to the Holy Spirit appears to have surrounded what the Spirit does economically rather than who the Spirit was essentially and ontologically. *Y. ↓
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Western
Theology.*

Many of the Early Greek Father appear not to place their main emphasis on the depravity of man and a developed and thorough doctrine of sin. It is precisely upon this doctrine of man and sin that we shall see the different emphases on the work of the Spirit as it developed in the Augustinian and Reformed tradition. In other words, depending on how man is understood in relation to God, will determine the manner in which different theologians will view the work of the Spirit.

The Cappadocian ^F fathers tended to emphasise the ontological essence of the Spirit and the unifying influence that he has upon the Body of the faithful. This significant tradition [it was treated with great respect by Calvin] emphasised the freedom of the will. The uniqueness of man made in the image of God consisted in the possession of free will. This free will was not lost at the Fall and so it is possible for everyone *↑*

to be able to come to faith. At the extreme of this view all of the responsibility for faith lies with a human decision. Athanasius and Chrysostom avoid original sin and their view of grace is conditioned by their emphasis on free will rather than the operation of grace. Man has got to be able to make a free choice either to accept or reject Christ. Without this freedom of choice man cannot be held responsible or judged for rejection.

The Influence of Augustine.

Augustine substantially challenged some of the Eastern Theologians and Pelagius in particular. He adamantly maintains that it does not lie within the power of man to be able effectively and savingly to believe in the gospel. According to Augustine, man is not capable of faith until he has first of all been regenerated and even then faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The work of regeneration is something that is impossible for man to operate upon himself because it is the sovereign responsibility of the Holy Spirit as he efficaciously carries out the sovereign and eternal will of God in his elect people. He totally refutes Pelagius' teaching that free will, without the effective aid of the Holy Spirit, is sufficient for

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a person to believe and be justified. Augustine's view is rooted in the concept of original sin and inherited depravity.

Augustine would be prepared to affirm that man's will is free, but would also say that it is totally devoid of absolute good and the ultimate ability to be able to please God, therefore he is not capable of truly understanding or reaching God. The Pelagian would counter this by maintaining that man's status has not essentially changed since the Fall because man is still able to choose good or evil with equal force. Man is free to choose and the only difference between us and Adam is the evil example of our parents and society. Adam's sin is not imputed to the human race otherwise Christ would automatically have come under the condemnation of such imputation. Pelagius obviously felt that Augustine's doctrine of grace was ~~was~~ a threat to human freedom, while Augustine felt that Pelagius was relinquishing the absolute need for grace. Pelagius held his position because he wanted to ensure that no person would be without excuse, ie. that they could not blame the deprave weakness of the human nature as an excuse for refusal to accept the gospel. Pelagius further claimed that there was "original grace" or the "grace of creation" which was given to all men. There was also the grace of revelation whereby God gave men the power to respond to the gospel. This was followed, claimed Pelagius, by the grace of pardon that God gives to all who

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repent. The anthropological significance of Pelagius' teaching is important especially when we come to Owen and the Confession. For Pelagius, Adam was created mortal and infants born in innocence. It is obvious with this view of man that there is going to be a denial of the sovereign, compulsive and irresistible power of the Holy Spirit in man's salvation. Semi-Pelagian^s took an apparently middle ground. This view was treated with both contempt and suspicion by Augustinian and Pelagian alike.

Prior to the Reformation the idea of merit, which seemed absent from both Augustine and Pelagius, held sway. The Reformers claimed that they were re-emphasising original sources by their return to the supremacy of Scripture. The work of the Spirit takes on a renewed importance for them and in their anxiety to depart from the notion of merit, they re-emphasise the sovereign responsibility of the Holy Spirit in man's salvation. Accordingly, not all who were in the visible Church belonged to the true Church because grace did not belong to the Church; it was the sovereign responsibility of the Holy Spirit as he carried out in individual lives the Eternal Decree of God. There was now a fundamental emphasis on the necessity of the work of the Spirit in the life of the individual sinner. Grace came from God to a person directly through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, rather than through the church.

Sacrament or the Church.

Arminianism would have sympathised with the Reformed view of grace alone, but would have resisted the concept of irresistible grace. The Holy Spirit did not have an irresistible operation because faith depended on man's free response. The Puritans were antagonistic to Arminianism and were concerned about the danger that if man could operate the act of faith in an independent manner, the grace of God would become secondary to faith and that there would be no need for the Spirit to effectually regenerate.

Roots of Puritanism

Where do the Puritans who formed the Confession and John Owen have their theological roots? It is obvious that the main theological influence on their thinking comes from Calvin. It would, therefore, be helpful briefly to examine Calvin's doctrine of the Spirit.

When Calvin is seeking to affirm the divinity of the Spirit, he argues that the ultimate proof of his divinity is that he is the author of regeneration. Calvin argues that the power and

grace bestowed by the Spirit in regeneration was "intrinsic rather than borrowed energy" [1].

Calvin further asserts the influence of the Spirit by linking the inspiration and authority of Scripture to the office of the Holy Spirit. [See Institutes Book 1 : 7]. Although the Scripture is inspired by the Spirit of God Calvin argues that it is impossible through human reason to arrive at a full faith in Scripture. He further reasons that man's salvation is totally bound up in an understanding of Scripture, but he can only understand the saving Word if the Spirit so influences him to do so. Although, then, the Scripture is the inspired message from God it is closed to man's reason because man's reason is so in darkness that he will never be able to grasp the essential understanding of the gospel. This is only possible when the Spirit makes a man a new creation through regeneration. Implicit in Calvin's view is that unless a person can immediately acknowledge the Scripture to be the inspired word of God then that is evidence that no work of regeneration has taken place. This creates a theological problem. If the essence of justification is through faith alone in Christ , does not this position then produce an irreducible minimum that is extra to faith alone - ie a certain doctrinal position on Scripture? Calvin would argue back that our reason is so ignorant of God that we would not be able to come to faith in

Christ except by regeneration through the Spirit and if the Spirit so effectively and effectually regenerated then we would also be persuaded of the divine source of his inspiration and its fruit in Scripture. [2]

Book Two of the Institutes opens with the assertion of the utter depravity of man - ie man is unable to find God or please him. For a person in such a condition to find salvation he needs the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit or he will remain in ignorance of the true God. Man is therefore deprived of any freedom of the will because he is hopelessly enslaved. [See Institutes Book 2:2:1]. He uses Augustine's argument that the will of man is never free without the Spirit because the human will is dominated by a desire to work contrary to the will of God. It is only when the will of man is freed by the Spirit that a person is free or able to believe truly.

Calvin strongly proposes that the work of the Spirit is efficacious as he applies the benefits of the death of Christ inwardly to the soul of man. [See Book 3:1:1] He wants to oppose the externalism of sacramentalism by stating that the Spirit regenerates inwardly rather than outwardly through the sacrament.

Faith, to Calvin, is the supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit and it is presumptuous of people to believe that it is their self generated faith that saves them. Faith is a gift that is given to the believer. This is obviously rooted in Calvin's doctrine of the Eternal Decree. It is not obviously left to man to choose God because it is God and not man who does the choosing. God, through the Holy Spirit, imparts the gift of faith only to the elect.

Owen and the Calvinistic Tradition

John Owen comes from this Calvinistic tradition. His father was a preacher who was in sympathy with the Calvinist position and so Owen would be familiar with this position from a young and impressionable age.

In 1628 Charles I had forbidden university debates on contentious issues and controversial subjects. Among those were the doctrines of election and predestination. It is interesting that after this prohibition was lifted Owen's first book was on the subject of predestination. It would appear that this for Owen was going to be his central emphasis, as indeed it was to be for the Westminster Confession [though it is argued by some that Calvin did not give the same emphasis as either of these two sources]. Along with this strong emphasis

on predestination Owen was to stress the free and unmerited grace of God.

Owen's work on the Holy Spirit begins as far back as 1642 and took some 30 years to come to completion. This was not therefore to be an immature response. The great arguments in Owen's time surrounded the findings of the Synod of Dort in 1618. The Synod was the touchstone of Calvinistic belief and asked the following critical questions;

1. Was the human will free or in bondage to sin?
2. Was the saving grace of God irresistible?
3. Did God choose the objects of his salvation before the world began?
4. Did Christ die only for the elect?
5. Is it possible for a believer to fall from grace?

To these questions Owen would have affirmed that the human will was not free to choose God, that Christ did die only for the elect, that God had an Eternal Decree and that because of the nature of regeneration it was not possible for a believer to fall from grace. In his work on Predestination in 1643 and ~~the~~ ¹ Death of Christ in 1647, Owen addressed himself to these questions and his conclusions fundamentally affected his doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

By 1674 when Owen published his first book on the Holy Spirit it was a time when Calvinistic and Puritan theology was under attack. Owen's work on the Spirit was his response to the Rationalism of the Socinians, the Mysticism of the Quakers, the Enthusiasm of the Fanatics and the theology of the Arminians. Owen's work on the Spirit must always be seen in this apologetic context.

In his Preface Owen immediately concludes that it is impossible for man by his own reason to understand or attain to the deep things of God. Revealing the deep things of God is the peculiar office of the Holy Spirit as it is only the Spirit who can open a person's understanding to receive the gospel. In agreement with Calvin he asserts that it is only through Scripture that a person can understand the will of God in salvation, but the true spiritual knowledge of such things as lead to salvation can only be communicated by the special operation of the Holy Spirit as he gives light to both the mind of man and Scripture;

" Accordingly we find in the New Testament, that whatever concerns the conversion of the elect, the edification of the church, the sanctification and consolation of believers, the performance of those duties of obedience which we owe unto God, with our conduct in all the ways thereof, is, in general and in particular instances, so appropriated unto him, as that it is

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withal declared that nothing of it in any kind can be enjoyed or performed without his [the Holy Spirit] especial operation, aid and assistance - so careful was God fully to instruct and to serve the faith of the Church in this matter, according as he knew its eternal concernments to lie therein"[3]

Further, he affirms his intention to maintain and defend the absolute sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer when he writes,

" Now, whereas the effectual operation of the blessed Spirit in the regeneration or conversion of sinners is, of all other parts of this work, most violently opposed, and hath of late been virulently traduced, I have more the largely insisted thereon."[4]

Owen states that if man's reason, without supernatural intervention from the Holy Spirit, was able to come to a true knowledge of God and inwardly and externally by his reason be able to understand the will of God, then there would be no need for special revelation in the Scriptures. This though does not seem accurate or conclusive as an argument. If man's knowledge, reason and will were seriously impaired and not lost altogether, but God gives supernatural revelation in and

through the Scriptures, then is this not an alternative way for God to awaken people's minds? Owen would argue back that a fundamental change in our nature cannot be appropriated by our reason - even as it appreciates the implications of supernatural revelation - it needs an inward work of supernatural proportions through the regenerating of the Holy Spirit.

It is clear then to Owen that nobody can acknowledge Jesus is Lord unless they possess the Holy Spirit. For assurance, he maintains that such a declaration is the pure effect of the Holy Spirit though he does warn against the dangers of formalism. God has therefore appointed two great means of saving people - first of all there is the giving of the Son and secondly the giving of the Holy Spirit. The great work of the Holy Spirit is the ministration of the gospel to the point where the elect believer will acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

Of the Holy Spirit, Owen claims that:

1 " The love , grace, counsel and eternal purpose of the Father; the whole work of the mediation of Jesus Christ.... it is the peculiar work of the Holy Spirit to make those things of the Father and the Son effectual unto the souls of the elect." [5]

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There ^{and} ~~is~~ therefore God's elect and the sole purpose of the Holy Spirit is to bring them in, seal them, sanctify them and empower them to do good works already planned. The gift of the Holy Spirit is not just for some believers but for all who believe. This is a brief summary of Owen but I shall look more carefully at his developed theology in certain areas as well as in the Confession after examining the issue of what is freedom in the next section. d?

It may at this point be worth reflecting on what is distinctive about the theological implications of Calvin and Owen as they follow Augustine, that would be different from, say, St Thomas.

There can be no doubt that on Predestination, St. Thomas would have followed Augustine, but the implications for Calvin and in particular Owen were more ecclesiastical rather than merely theological. In Calvin and in particular in Owen, the doctrine of election led to a very definite understanding of the church invisible and a strong desire to create and preserve as near perfect ^{by} _a as possible a pure church. Owen certainly developed Calvin on this point, not accepting the presence of those who were nominal as part of the church and various tests to determine whether or not a person was in truth a member of the by d

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Church.

FREEDOM

The Oxford Dictionary defines freedom as : Independence, liberty of action, power of self-determination, exempt from slavery. Other definitions include the following;

[a] Independent of fate ^{or} of necessity or ?

[b] Not the object of the predetermined will of another party and not bound by a known or unknown act of necessity.

[c] Independence without accountability to or interference from another agent. The consequent absence of moral absolutes from our choices.

Freedom is therefore the ability to act according to a choice, according to the comparisons that are made between choices. There is the freedom to choose other than what we might in fact do, but there has to be freedom in the first place.

Looking at the above definitions the one concept that runs through them all is the concept of independent free choice. If freedom means independence did God therefore intend man to be free in the absolute sense of the word? Both Owen and the Confession would probably follow the line that absolute ^{independent or autonomous} freedom and sin are almost the same thing and God could not therefore

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have willed man to be free. To them, man would not be free from absolutes and from God's right to interfere in man's life. In respect of many things man was made for dependence upon God and is morally accountable to him. If man is given a free choice and it is a choice with consequences, his choice cannot be neutral.

Owen and Freedom

Owen would probably argue that in his bid for independence, man falls and is no longer free. Worse than that, Owen would argue that man lost totally the image of God through the Fall and is no^w totally depraved. This is clearly put in his general introduction to the doctrine of Justification;

"Some deny the deprivation and corruption of our nature, which ensued on our apostasy from God, and the loss of his image...That deformity of soul which came upon us in the loss of the image of God..emⁿity unto God...that darkness of our understandings...spiritual death...that impotency unto good, that inclination unto evil.." [6]

Man is now a slave to his own choice but in his unregenerate state he does not see it as a bad choice - it is only seen as a bad choice when the Holy Spirit shows it to be so when he

regenerates. Man cannot choose not to sin and so Owen would maintain that man is no longer free not to sin and not to die and therefore cannot be free in an absolute sense. Man is no longer free even to choose God because that desire is no longer in him.

All of the above seems to conclusively state that man is not free in any true respect to choose God and the argument has a certain logical flow to it. What we have to ask is whether this logic flows from a false premise. The argument seems to depend on what actually happened to the status of man at the Fall. Did he lose the image of God completely or was it just impaired, even seriously?

Some Questions Concerning Freedom

A further question has to be asked: if we are made or formed with a certain purpose by God and made in his image, how free are we? The inventor and creator of a machine does not expect the machine to act irrationally or independently. The machine is free to malfunction but is that freedom going to benefit either the machine or its creator? It would call for the intervention of the creator at some point to repair the fault that had caused the 'free' malfunction. Man is more than a machine, but is it true to say that the image of God and

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freedom are the same thing? Have Owen and the compilers of the Confession not got a valid point in suggesting that when man Fell he did not lose freedom, because he never had it in an absolute sense? Does not the image of God mean the moral characteristics of God transmitted into man? Man chose to be free from the moral absolutes that the image of God had placed upon him and as a consequence lost his status. The big question is whether he lost it entirely or whether it was seriously impaired? It may seem a small point of difference but it is the main point of contention between the Calvinists and the Arminians in the way in which they perceive the role of the Holy Spirit. This whole line of argument is only valid if we can truly speak of God as having moral characteristics.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

The Reformers would have viewed the image of God as consisting of three elements - knowledge, righteousness and holiness. If this^{is} how the image is conceived, how does Owen respond to this? 127

First of all knowledge. True knowledge consists of a knowledge of God as man exists in relationship with God. This knowledge and relationship has been lost through the Fall entirely and man exists in ignorance of the true God. Man has therefore, according to Owen, lost true knowledge.

Secondly, righteousness. Being right with God and the ability to do right in terms of God's will is also lost. Man is inherently a sinner and even the good that he does, because he does it apart from God, is tarnished by sin, and unacceptable to God.

Thirdly, holiness is only possible if man has the Holy Spirit, and since the Holy Spirit is only given to the elect, true holiness is impossible for the unregenerate person.

All of this would lead Owen to understand that man has completely lost the image of God. If we add freedom to our understanding of man in the image of God, then, according to Owen's basic hypothesis, man cannot be free.

Understanding Freedom

This whole area of discussing freedom is a minefield because so much depends upon what we mean by freedom. Packer in the Illustrated Bible Dictionary looks at the concept of freedom morally, psychologically, metaphysically and theologically. they are worth quoting in full.

" 1. If the phrase 'free will' is to be understood morally and psychologically as meaning the power of unconstrained,

spontaneous, voluntary and therefore responsible choice, the Bible everywhere assumes that all men, as such, possess it, unregenerate and regenerate alike.

2. If the phrase be taken metaphysically, as implying that man's future actions are indeterminate and in principle unpredictable, the Bible seems neither to assert or deny an indeterminacy of future action relative to the agent's own moral or physical constitution, but it does seem to imply that no future event is indeterminate relative to God, for he foreknows and in some senses foreordains all things.

3. If the phrase be taken theologically, as denoting a natural ability on the part of the unregenerate to perform acts that are good without qualification in God's sight, or to respond to the gospel invitation, such passages as Rom 8:5-8; Eph 2:1-10; Jn 6:44 seem to indicate that no man is free for obedience and faith till he is freed from sin's domination by prevenient grace. All his voluntary choices are in one way or another acts of serving sin till grace breaks sin's power and moves him to the gospel."[7]

I chose to quote from Packer because he stands firmly in the Puritan tradition and is a great advocate of Owen and the Westminster Confession. The great question raised in 3 is

whether or not this implies that unregenerate man is made regenerate because that is something that he freely wants to happen to him or whether it is due to an irresistible external force at work compelling him to believe. There is also the question as to whether 1 and 3 are compatible. Again and again, as we shall see later in the examination of the Confession this dualism arises where on the one hand man is spoken of as being morally and psychologically free but theologically and spiritually not free

Edwards and Freedom

Admittedly later than Owen and the Confession, but standing in the same tradition, is Jonathan Edwards. It may be beneficial to examine Edwards to see if there is broad agreement between him and his theological predecessors.

Edwards starts by using a definition of freedom [not his own]; '..for the will to be free, it must act from a position of being neutral and have no bias ..' The consequence of this definition would therefore be a choice made for no reason. If there is no reason then there is no moral significance and the choice cannot be judged good or bad.

If the above argument is applied to the broad determinism of Owen then it can only be critical of his view of predestination. God cannot choose the elect because of anything worthy or good about them and man is therefore incapable of choosing God. If God decided to choose certain men, for reasons best known to him, but from a human perspective a choice made, not because of any moral significance on the part of the recipients of his grace, then how can God judge either the good or bad in man?

The whole question of whether a position of neutrality is possible has to be raised. Christian theology would certainly argue that man was not created morally neutral. This would therefore pose the question as to whether or not man was made morally flawed or imperfect. If his decisions are not made from a neutral perspective, what implications does this have as to the nature of freedom?

The second area that Edwards examines is judgement and the existence of motives. He asks that if there is no prior reasonable inclination for a choice, how can a choice in truth be made? One of the problems that this raises for the Christian position is that if a choice is made on the basis of a reasonable inclination, and the choice turns out to be the wrong one, where did the bad inclination come from and why was

it more powerful than a good inclination? Does that mean that man was not neutral and was more biased towards disobedience? If man was biased to disobey how can man therefore be judged for such disobedience? If a man cannot help doing something then how can he be blamed? Might it not mean therefore that man is being judged ontologically rather than morally?

To Edwards the will is "mind choosing". We have got to have some idea of what we are choosing before we make a choice ie the mind either accepts or rejects the alternatives that ~~it~~ are offered. If the mind is not involved then the choices are made for no reason. Edwards has a second definition to build on the first : it is the ability to choose what we want. We choose according to our desires. Edwards argues that a human being is not just free to choose what he desires - he is compelled to make that choice, to be able to choose at all!! Accordingly, the will always chooses according to the strongest inclination at the moment. A neutral view of the will is impossible because it involves a choice for no reason and without desire.

Owen would certainly agree with this definition. He would argue that man's desires are basically anti-God, thus all his choices are wrong and sinful [sinful in the sense that the^y emanate from a sinful nature and every seemingly good act comes from a

corrupt source]. Man is not therefore free because it is impossible for him to desire God or to please him.

Man's problem lies in the nature of his desires and his moral abilities. Man has to have a desire to please God before he is able to please God. The question addressed by Owen and the Confession, is whether man in his fallen state has the neutral/moral ability to be able to please God? Owen would argue that at the Fall man lost his freedom and his desire to please God. He has subsequently lost the moral ability to choose Christ. If this is the case and man is to have any desire for God, that desire has to be implanted by God. If God does not implant that desire then nobody will ever be able in truth to freely choose God. Both Owen and the Confession would say that our minds and desires are so overwhelmingly biased to disobedience that it takes more than the reasonable persuasion of God to change this - it takes a fundamental act of regeneration and this is not an act of interference that obstructs freedom because this is God mercifully to setting the enslaved person free.

Owen and the Fall

Many theologians are more concerned with the position of man prior to the Fall. Owen is not so concerned about the original

condition as he is with the present condition. Questions such as whether or not man was originally free or not are useless to him because they do not affect man in his present enslaved condition. But is this the case? Owen's view sees man losing the image of God completely. In other words Owen perceives the destruction and not the corruption of the image. What then is the problem of that view?

The problem that arises is Owen's concept of God's ultimate intention to judge. If the image of God is completely destroyed and subsequently this is inherited by all, how can he then say that God can exercise penal judgement on all unbelievers? His view on predestination may make sense in that it is perfectly possible for God to choose to save some and not others. However is it just of God to judge all who helplessly sin and cannot choose otherwise? Surely God could only judge the original couple, according to Owen's theology? For Owen's whole argument to be consistent on this point he would be better stating "corruption" rather than "destruction" of the image.

The Classic Confrontation

The classic confrontation on freedom and the bondage of the will takes place between Erasmus and Luther, and it is from

Luther's basic premise that Owen and the compilers of the Confession derive their basic theology on freedom.

Luther and Erasmus were not arguing about the reality of human choice. Luther was not saying that people are not capable of spontaneous choice [though later, Owen comes close to suggesting ~~to say~~ that even in this area of human psychology God ordains all men's actions, whether good or bad]. When Luther denied ^fee will, he was denying the ability of man to save himself and at the same time affirming the Sovereign mercy of God. Erasmus affirmed on the other hand that man was able freely to choose or reject eternal salvation. Luther argues that man is not good and does not therefore have the ability to please God and cannot contribute anything to his salvation. Luther would deny that God makes it possible for a man to save himself.

Erasmus does not deny that sin has weakened man but that God has made it possible for man to be saved. This salvation comes through faith and not by divine compulsion. Luther and those who followed his view in the Reformation seemed so neurotic about the possibility of human worth or merit that they were incapable of seeing Erasmus' clear position. If God has produced a wealth of grace and love to be freely offered to the world through the Holy Spirit - and that corrupted nature has

still not lost the image of God, then why is it so abhorrent for faith to respond to this great love while others freely reject it? Does that really suggest human merit, and glorify the human will or does it not bear witness to the infinite grace and mercy of God?

The position taken by Luther and those who follow him in thought, leads inevitably to a high doctrine of absolute predestination. They were so vigorous in their defence of the freedom, grace and sovereignty of God, as against the corrupt practices that suggested merit, they failed to do proper Biblical justice to the dignity of man, who was described in his fallen condition in Psalm 8,

"You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honour"

The majesty, Sovereignty and Glory of God is not diminished by a healthy and glorious view of man even in his fallen condition : on the contrary, the Majesty of God is revealed through the glory of his image in man even when man ~~is~~ Fallen. 15/

Owen in the development of his theology deprives man of any divine, or indeed human dignity. He is not free - he is awful, dirty, corrupt and degenerate in God's sight. This has a very

profound psychological effect on people when they are continually confronted with this sort of theology. They are driven by a sense of their worthlessness to try and appease or please God and so their assurance very often forms a justification by works syndrome. There is no abiding assurance of their worth as a person because anything that is of any worth in them is there because God put it there, and anything that they achieve can receive no praise nor derive any personal satisfaction because God is responsible for our good works. There is not even the possibility of joy at choosing God because he chose us in his grace and without this he would be lost.

The question as to whether or not man is free to choose God is a fundamental one and the answer that we adopt leads to complete opposites on the spectrum.

The Westminster Confession

What is it that motivated those who were responsible for forming the Confession? There was felt to be a need for a fundamental source of guidance for the faith and so the Confession was born as much from political necessity as religious conviction and need - the two, in this period in history, being sometimes difficult to separate in any case.

One of the concerns of those who formed the Confession, was the desire to distance itself from monarchical interference in religious matters, as well as displaying opposition to Rome and its teachings and the right of ecclesiastical sovereignty. They wanted in part to move away from what they saw as the dangers of a theology that was either man-centred or ecclesiastically centred. This may in part account for the very strong emphasis in the document as it stresses the absolute freedom and sovereignty of God. In an era when the Divine Right of Kings was being promoted by the monarchy, the Confession was at pains to stress the Divine Sovereignty and Election of God, partly in order to subdue the ambitions of earthly rulers who got above themselves. The Confession confirms the sola gratia character of salvation. God cannot be bought at any price. It is

interesting how easily the notions of grace and sovereignty appear together in this document.

Another great stress in the Confession is the sole authority of the Word of God for the Church. It was not the right or privilege of a king, pope, or government to be the authoritative voice of religious belief. Always, the freedom of God from all human decision, is emphasised. Man has no claim therefore on the favour of God unless God should choose to impart it; which he does to some and not to others. It is at this point of sovereignty that the Confession almost appears to have a fatal flaw. Could it be that their concept of sovereignty in either the church or from the monarch in its abuse, has influenced ^{unduly} corruptly their view of the sovereignty of God? /

One of the criticisms of the Confession is that there is no specific chapter on the Holy Spirit. However, in fairness to the document, the ministry of the Spirit permeates most of the document as it highlights the many faceted ministry his person. 24

Before looking in detail at the Confession, it is worth highlighting some of the obvious weaknesses. For this I am indebted to James Torrance for his article in, 'The Westminster Confession in the Church Today', who speaks of,

'...the decided move to a view where election precedes grace, so that the interpretation of the Person and Work of Christ is subordinated to the doctrine of the decrees, and is seen as God's way of executing the decrees for the elect. The result is that grace is limited to the redemption^s of the elect... John Owen and Jonathan Edwards took this to its logical conclusion that Justice is the essential attribute by which God is related to all as Judge, but the love of God is arbitrary! But what doctrine of God is that? It is a concept of God derived from 'reason', 'the light of nature' and the Western notions of 'natural law' and 'the law of contract^s' and read back into the Bible. But it is not a Biblical view of God as Love [Father, Son and Holy Spirit] in his innermost Being, and that his being is manifested in all his activities, in Creation, Providence, as well as Redemption'. [8]

While I whole-heartedly agree with Torrance, his argument is not water tight. The concept of God's justice does not exclude his perfect love of the elect as essential to him. It is still love, though it may be more restricted in scope. It is arbitrariness that is the problem here ie God is represented as arbitrary here, which is surely an imperfection.

However, this total and preconditioning belief in the Eternal Decrees taking prime place in a theological system such as the Confession leads Torrance to the following questions;

[1] How does God execute the Eternal decrees? By Creation, Providence, permitting the Fall, Redemption, Effectual calling etc?

[2] How does God secure the Redemption of the Elect?

[3] How does God effectually apply the benefits of the covenant of Grace to the elect, in the life of the believer and in the gift of the means of grace, Church, Word and Sacraments?

[4] How does the believer know if he is among the elect and is someone for whom Christ died, and how can he find assurance of salvation? [9]

All these questions, and in particular, the final one have to be satisfactorily answered before the Confession can be viewed as a truly Christian statement of faith based broadly on the revelation of Scripture.

The Confession, Scripture and the Spirit

I want now to examine the Confession in some detail to see how the Spirit's work is perceived with reference to personal freedom, even though there is no specific chapter on the Spirit in the document.

The Confession has a high view of Scripture to the point where it is persuaded as to the perfection of the book. It is fair enough that people understand Scripture in this way, but this thinking led the writers of the Confession to some very definite views about man's response to Scripture. How, were they to account for the indifferent way that many perceived the Scriptures, or indeed totally failed to grasp the essence of Biblical teaching? The answer had to lie in a 'faulty man' because it could not possibly lie in a faulty Scripture! To them, mankind was so spiritually depraved and blind, that it was impossible for him to recognise the perfections of Scripture nor understand its essential message. People are so totally depraved in this respect that they simply cannot make sense of the essential nature and message of the Bible. It would take a fundamental change in man's nature for him to understand the Bible and this only as a result of the operation of the Holy Spirit.

"..our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts".[10]

The emphasis here is on the 'full persuasion'. If someone confesses the Christian faith and relates to Jesus as Lord, but is not persuaded as to the infallibility of all Scripture, then this section would surely imply that that person is not a Christian and cannot have the Spirit!

Some commentators are at pains to point out that this section is not Barthian, but has to do with the believer's assurance as to the infallibility of Scripture, rather than saying that the word becomes such by the inner work of the Spirit. It is, they argue, the infallible Word and the Spirit that assures us of this. The difficulty here for Barthians arises from confusing inspiration with illumination ie the Word of God is inspired, but it is only the illumination of the Spirit who convinces us of this.

The Confession therefore asserts that no-one can read the Bible and come to the conclusion that it is infallibly God's Word without the prior illumination of the Holy Spirit. Without this illumination, a person could simply never understand the

Bible's true and absolute authority. A person, in and of himself, is not freely able to come to the Bible and understand essential truth without the illumination of the Spirit.

However, the Confession goes a stage further in the argument by asserting that,

'...the inward illumination of the Spirit is necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word' [11]

In other words, it may be possible to deduce certain things from Scripture, but it is not possible to come to saving faith by reading the Bible - this is only possible as the Spirit reveals such a saving and evangelical understanding. What the Confession is early on implying, is that the true meaning of the Bible is revealed only to the elect! How else can you account for two people reading the same gospel and yet while one understands and is saved, the other never comes to faith? There is a certain logic in the argument, but surely other factors such as prior knowledge, intellectual ability, sometimes poor teaching of the Bible, the psychological make up of different individuals etc, must also be taken into account? A seemingly logical conclusion based on observation need not be accurate and certainly will not be accurate if one simply says;

all men are the same under sin and they will all respond in a similar fashion to Scripture unless the Spirit illuminates their minds. Other factors relating to the psychology of the individual, other sociological ingredients etc must also be taken into account to explain either acceptance or rejection.

It is possible ^{however} though to place another interpretation on this passage. It can surely be clear that it is possible for the 'natural' man reading the Bible to understand how to be saved or regenerated. The knowledge that salvation or regeneration is possible does not guarantee that the individual will want it or accept it. But, the exponents of the Confession would argue that regeneration or faith is only possible or desired if the Holy Spirit implants a desire for a saving understanding.

Accordingly, the Confession would maintain that without the Spirit, a person cannot accept the infallible truth of the Bible. It is logical therefore from this point of view that without the direct influence of the Spirit, a person could not understand such revelation within the Bible as leads to salvation. Therefore, according to the logic of what the Confession implies, without the Bible [a Spirit-inspired document] it would not be possible for a person to receive God's salvation. This can only happen through the Spirit's illuminating, persuading and effectual ministry.

The Eternal Decree

In chapter 3, the role of the Spirit is implicit in the will and administration of the Eternal Decree. It is plain that the Confession's authors in no way confuse foreknowledge and predestination;

'...yet hath he not decreed any thing because he foresaw it as future..' [12]

The fact of predestination is then clearly taught, as indeed is the concept of the double decree;

'...some men and angels are predestined to everlasting life, and others are foreordained to everlasting death...'[13]

What then is the difference between 'foreordain' and 'predestinate'? This argument is classically argued as double predestination ie the positive side is election to eternal life and the negative side is eternal reprobation. God chooses to rescue some from their sin and chooses to leave others in their sin. This doctrine defined [predestination and reprobation] is fine so far as it goes. It seems from this part of the Confession that the Spirit saves those whom God has predestined to everlasting life. The real problem in the text revolves

around the logical conclusion that comes from election to eternal life - 'foreordained to everlasting death'.

If this is so then it must clearly imply that God determined and chose to condemn a fixed and certain number of people to eternal death and that in this respect, his will is unchangible. The fate of the damned is so sealed, that nothing they do can ever save them because God's determinative will cannot be broken. The Holy Spirit is not a free missionary, but is finally and crucially bound to save only a certain number. How far away this is from 2 Peter 3:9b '...He [God] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance'.

The classical argument in defence of the Confession's doctrine would say that God is not unjust in choosing to save some and determining to pass over others. God is just because he chooses to pass over those who deserve punishment for their sins. But if sin is inherited without choice [which it has to be according to classical Calvinism] then the person who is born a sinner has no freedom to choose not to be a sinner or to choose to be saved from his sin - that person is a prisoner without hope from birth to beyond the grave. Shedd in his defence of the Westminster standards maintains,

" The doctrine of the divine decrees...runs entirely through the Westminster documents, so that if changes were made merely in the third chapter of the Confession, it would be wholly out of harmony with the remainder. Effectual calling, regeneration, perseverance of the saints, are linked in with the divine decree..." [14]

Again Shedd argues that it is not because of sin, according to the Confession, that men are not regenerate,

"..the reason for God's passing by or omitting to regenerate a sinner, is found in the unsearchable counsel of his own will whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth... sin is not the reason why God does not regenerate them. If sin were the reason for non-election, holiness, logically, would be the reason for election...this is Arminian doctrine, not the Calvinistic.." [15]

James Philip in his commentary attempts a classical defence of the doctrine with a view to integrating predestination and free will. He maintains that we have to try and hold both in a polarity of truth rather than overemphasise one and thus compromise the other. If we take this advice then surely the Confession would be found guilty of such an overemphasis!! In the long run Philip inevitably concludes that we have got to

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accept a high degree of mystery with regard to the will of God, but he concludes his examination with these words,

'..there is something causeless and unconditional in man's salvation - even arbitrary, but we use that word responsibly'.

It is difficult to see how the notion of polarity helps to clarify the situation, especially with the Confession's strong emphasis on the double decree. There is no account of how this polarity can be maintained, and this is where the classical argument falls down in its incompleteness.

Philip continues his argument by asking whether there is a doctrine of double decree in the Confession. He clearly thinks that there is, but it is ultimately man's sin that condemns him. His next question is therefore inevitable - is it just of God to ordain some to eternal perdition. Philip is of the opinion that justice does not come into it. Man could only have a claim on the justice of God if he was completely righteous and blameless. Be that as it may and all people surely are equally unrighteous, so what basis does God use for his discrimination? In any case, it is quite clear that the Confession does not say that God condemns people on the basis of his foreknowledge of their unrighteousness, but that he foreordains them to everlasting death according to his eternal

will. Shedd clarifies this point when examining the doctrine of the Decrees in the Confession,

"God may manifest great and unmerited compassion to all men in common grace and the outward call, and limit his compassion if he please to some men in special grace and the effectual call. He may call upon all men to repent and believe, and promise salvation to all that do so, and yet not incline all men to do so".[16].

What we have to ask at this point is whether the Confession document is true to the substantial witness of the New Testament. Is the main emphasis of the gospel the love of God for the world or God's eternal decrees. According to the Confession and Owen, when they speak of the eternal decree they refer to God's desire only to show mercy to the elect. It is a logical deduction that there is a double decree once unconditional predestination is accepted. The classical reply back is that God transcends human logic, thus shutting the door on further enquiry or another alternative.

MacLeod clarifies this classical argument in a banner of Truth magazine article by stating that,

[a] Election is sovereign

[b] Reprobation is judicial. Banner of Truth Magazine Feb 1972

The implication is that some people are saved despite their sins while others are condemned for their sins. MacLeod argues that election is causative and efficacious whereas reprobation is privative. God chooses to pass over some and thus he ordains them to the just and inevitable punishment for their sins. But this argument fails to take adequate account of original sin. If God permits the Fall to happen and the consequence of the Fall is the total depravity of man with the subsequent loss of freedom to choose God and choose good, then surely God has ordained the reprobate to judgement apart from justice? If a person can choose in the light of real choices then, and only then, is that person wholly culpable. Even natural justice would insist on this, if we take the example of two people who commit the same offence. The deprived child who has been maltreated, shown no right and good moral example and been given no guidance at home, when he commits an offence is still guilty, but has other factors taken into consideration. The child from a good home who has had love, good example, moral guidance etc, is considered more culpable in the law's eyes for the same offence. One has to ask therefore whether according to the Confession, judgement is on the basis of action or being?

To come back to Philip's statement that we have got to hold both predestination and free will in polarity of truth while not overemphasising one, has an element of fairness. But is

this what the Confession does. If the Confession claims to have its roots in the New Testament then surely it has made a major doctrine and given it a place of overall emphasis, to a doctrine which in terms of New Testament revelation, has a very minor place indeed?

The Spirit's role in the working out or application of the decree is emphatically stated;

'...are redeemed by Christ; are effectively called into faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season...neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified and saved, but the elect only'.[17]

Is there freedom for the Holy Spirit to go into the whole world and to everyone with the gospel? Surely he can only influence and save the elect?

The Confession concludes this section by stating that the whole purpose of the doctrine of election is the assurance of the believer. This they assert is so, because it convinces the believer that a person's salvation does not depend upon their faith or decision, but upon the effectual election of God working it out efficaciously through the Holy Spirit. This of course is no accident, the question as to whether the prominence

of effectual election as stated in the Confession actually does promote assurance that God loves the believer? It can assure somebody, only if they are sure they are elect, but who is sure whether or not they are elect? In all my contacts with people who have been exposed to this doctrine in such an extreme and one-sided way, I would argue that I have yet to meet one person who has a great measure of assurance - quite the opposite. what I have encountered ~~in~~ joylessness and uncertainty and often, despair. is/

In other words, you know the validity of the presentation of a doctrine by the fruit it produces. Many would argue, with some justification, that the prominence given to the eternal decree at the expense of a universal declaration of the love of God, actually hinders rather than promotes assurance. Surely the whole purpose of the Holy Spirit coming into a life, is to assure them of the love of God?

Berkouwer maintains, in his book on election, that the gospel must take priority over election, but that our election is proved by our response. He accepts many of the criticisms made against the doctrine historically, but rather than blame the doctrine, he blames bad presentation. He is critical of the doctrine being presented in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish from arbitrariness. He claims that an

identification with arbitrariness would influence our entire mode of thinking and speaking of God. The gospel surely claims that God is reliable and not arbitrary. [18]

It is clear to me that the Confession and indeed Owen present the eternal decrees in an abstract and isolated fashion which immediately implies some form of determinism. This fixes the decrees of God in such a way that there can be no statement of his love for the world. Reid argues that the extreme Reformed position taken in the Confession separates election and grace.[See The Westminster Confession in the Church today page 132ff]. It is almost as if the Confession produces a God that is different from the image of God in Christ that the New Testament produces. The way in which the doctrine is presented in the Confession produces an element of threat and uncertainty rather than comfort and assurance to the believer.

In section 5 the Confession states,

'According to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly...yet by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely or contingently'. [19]

God therefore , through the Holy Spirit, makes use of his creation as the legitimate vehicle for providence to be worked through. Though people may be blissfully ignorant of the fact, God is effectually ordaining and putting into effect his will through all the events of history. It is not possible for any person to change or in any way alter God's determined plan for his life. All supposedly free acts are not free acts. There is precious little, if any, difference between what is considered contingent and necessary.

However, the most interesting section on Providence is,

' As for those wicked and ungodly men, whom God as a righteous judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden, from them he not only withholdeth his grace, whereby they have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin, and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptation of the world, and the power of satan; whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth to soften others'.[20]

That passage is fairly clear. God, the forgiver of the sinner, discriminates among sinners and decides to harden the hearts of

some, because of their former sins so as to make saving faith an impossibility. This differential is not one of decree. It is perfectly possible for two people to be just as sinful in God's eyes, and because one is obviously elect and the other not, God uses providence to harden some and to soften only the elect.

It seems that the above point is arrived at more from experience than anything else. It is an attempt to understand why it is that some people who appeared under the influence of the Spirit did not follow this through to lasting commitment. So entrenched in a doctrine of absolute sovereignty is this document that it is almost predictable that this hardening would be perceived as a sovereign act of God and not purley an act of the human will.

This places a new complexion on human freedom with respect to God and salvation. Obviously the Holy Spirit permits man no freedom because God will work out his will irrespective, and even using man unwittingly and ironically to make his will sure and certain. The Holy Spirit does not even give to people the freedom to believe or reject, but hardens their hearts to make belief impossible. There is no real freedom - only perhaps the limited freedom that a prisoner has to go where he likes within his cell.

Depravity of Man

On the Fall of man the Confession is absolutely clear on its statement of man's depravity,

'is wholly defiled in all the faculties of soul and body... and he is utterly indisposed, disabled and made opposite to all good and wholly inclined to all evil...'[21]

No matter how one can try to manoeuvre away from this teaching on depravity, it is obvious that it exists because of the eternal decree. It is the only way of holding to the necessity of regeneration through the effectual work of the Holy Spirit. Any other view of man would make it possible for for the remaining moral good in in man to be able to freely come to God without the necessity of regeneration.

In chapter 7 the Confession seems to state hopefully,

'...he [God] freely offers to sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Christ, that they may be saved; and promising to give to all that are ordained to life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe'.[22]

At first there seems to be a refreshing universal statement here where people are free and capable to exercise faith. However, a safeguard is placed to make sure that faith is not seen as a condition of salvation and so the free, electing, sovereignty of God is protected. salvation has got to be unconditionally elective if the efficacy of the Holy Spirit is to be protected in the theology of the Confession. Faith is the proof of salvation, which is the result of the Holy Spirit's prior work. The evidence of salvation is the gift of faith. The existence of faith is proof that a person is elect. However both Owen and the Confession so vigorously define the "evidences" of faith and the fact that a person can seem to have God working in a person's life, when in fact all the Holy Spirit is doing is illuminating but not saving the person. The complexities go on to the point that faith in the finished work of Christ is insufficient, because if only the elect are to be saved, what is the evidence of their election? There is an almost obsessive concern to sift the sheep from the goats.

Christ the Mediator

When the Confession moves on to what ought to be the noblest theme in theology - the theme of Christ the Mediator, one is left feeling cheated. The Confession does not so much deal with a great evangelical doctrine that ought to be freely proclaimed

in order to offer Christ's benefits to all, but is more concerned with the question of 'how the elect are saved'.

'The benefits of redemption are communicated to the elect in all ages from the beginning of the world...effectually persuading them by his Spirit to believe and obey'.[23]

Once again the Confession maintains its entrenched position by concentrating its central focus in all doctrines upon the eternal decree.

The Confession certainly acknowledges free will prior to the Fall of man. It maintains that man was not forced to do good or evil and in his state of innocence was given freedom and power to do good and what pleases God. This of course assumes that that kind of absolute freedom existed prior to the Fall and that innocence is a theological term that can rightly be attributed to the state of man prior to his Fall.

The result of the Fall, or the consequence of the Fall, according to the Confession totally reverses man's condition, and so now,

[a] Man in sin has wholly lost all ability of the will to do any spiritual good, accompanying salvation.

[b] Man is totally averse to all good.

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[c] Man is dead in sin.

[d] Man cannot convert or save himself.

All this seems to go too far towards determinism. Philip sums up the Confession's theological and philosophical viewpoint on the logic of free will,

'... is not that we put our faith in Christ, but that before ever we did, the Spirit of God was drawing us, giving us faith with which to believe'.

Section 10 on effectual calling sums this deterministic viewpoint up logically and perfectly,

'...all those God has predestined to life, and only those, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time effectively to call, by his Word and Spirit....yet so as they come freely, being made willing by his grace...'[24]

It is perhaps section 3 on effectual calling on the election of infants and infidels [and presumably the insane] that is most contentious,

'Infants and mentally defective people are not responsible beings and therefore cannot be called upon by the Word to

respond to the gospel. God reserves the right to apply the work of Christ sovereignly by his Spirit alone, apart from the Word in such cases'.[25]

The implications are that God has an elect in this group of mentally defective persons and infants. Some are obviously ordained to eternal life and others to reprobation. This has enormous implications for the 20th Century debate on the status of the foetus and abortion. If a person's existence begins, as the image of God, from or near conception, then there are obviously elect and non-elect foetuses. Reprobation can of course be justified through the doctrine of original sin.

Election and Assurance

Perhaps this overemphasis on election is best summed up in chapter 18,

'...infallible assurance does not belong to the essence of faith..."[26]

According to this section the true believer may wait a long time before receiving assurance. Lloyd Jones teaching on the sealing of the Spirit maintains that many Puritans believed that this subsequent experience of the Spirit brought immediate

assurance. It was often agreed that a believer could depart this life without ever having assurance. This seems to be contrary to the New Testament, where assurance of God's love was normal and immediate to the believer.

Owen and Regeneration

The doctrine of the necessity of regeneration before someone can become a believer is one of the most hotly debated. Owen argues that it is only the regenerate who will have any hope of ever entering the kingdom of God. He would argue that there are only the regenerate in the true church.

Exactly what is meant by the term regeneration will affect greatly how one interprets the Spirit's work in the life of the believer. It can possibly mean a few things:

Reformed Views of Regeneration

Generally Reformed Theology would identify regeneration in the following terms:-

[a] Restoration. Generally in Reformed theology, this implies restoring something which was lost. In the legal sense it means a restoration of status. The sinner is guilty before God and estranged as a result. His status before God needs to be restored. He needs to be made right with God and through

adoption be brought into the Divine family. Both these things happen at the same time though they are separated for the purpose of doctrinal clarity. Restoration implies more than just a legal understanding but implies positionally and psychologically being restored into a real and living relationship to God.

[b] It involves new birth. The new birth is the means through which the sinner is restored into the grace of God. Owen expositis at length the teaching of John 3 in respect of this doctrine of regeneration. As we are born once in a physical sense and have no human status without birth, so the sinner needs to be born again in a spiritual sense and this is seen as the direct work of the Holy Spirit. This operation by the Spirit transforms the individual completely.

[c] It involves the estranged person becoming a new person or a new creation in Christ. This implies a new nature as essential and opposite to the old nature. The new nature is implanted in the believer by the Holy Spirit.

Though Owen would not deny or diminish in any way the great Reformation doctrine of justification through faith alone, he

would view such faith as wholly and completely coming from the secret and inner working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the now believing person. To him, it would be impossible for the believer to claim that he had any part [even a decision to believe] in justification because from beginning to end he sees it as the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit carrying out the will of the Father.

It is perhaps worth noting that the term regeneration itself is used in Matthew 19:28 and refers to the great act of consummation at the end of time when the world will be saved and transformed and is therefore often used in this respect as a spur to moral excellence in the life of the believer. It is true that regeneration is implied in various contexts and in particular John 3.

When the term regeneration is used and implied it normally indicates the following:

- [1] Helping someone or something into a renewed existence.
- [2] To add to what already exists, a newer or higher spiritual nature.

The Illustrated Bible Dictionary defines regeneration as:

"A drastic act on fallen nature by the Holy Spirit, leading to a change in the person's whole outlook" [27].

Owen's View

I want to specifically look at what Owen has to say of the role of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. I believe that there are many who would hold to the necessity of the doctrine of regeneration who would not be prepared to go as far as Owen.

"He [the Holy Spirit] effectually communicates a new principle of spiritual life into the souls of God's elect". [28].

What does Owen mean by "principle"? Does he mean cause or quality? He surely implies the implantation of something that was not previously there before - ie spiritual life! A lot depends on how we interpret what Owen is saying here, but it is safe to assume that only the elect can be made regenerate and this can only happen by the effectual work of the Holy Spirit and on no account from anything in the person.

To Owen, regeneration is the peculiar work of the Holy Spirit and he derives his doctrine from John 3:3-6. Owen is prepared

to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit does use external means of regenerating the elect. In particular he is of the opinion that the reading of the Bible and preaching can be used effectually as the means of regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

Curiously, Owen admits that it is possible for a person, at least for a time, to be regenerate and not know it or alternatively have no assurance of it. I found this impossible to understand. It is like suggesting that a person could be married and not know it. Surely if regeneration requires such a fundamental change, the person could hardly but be unaware of it. It seems impossible to me that a fundamental change of heart and mind which is the result of the irresistible and effectual work of the Holy Spirit, could result in little or no assurance. Perhaps what we do see here is Owen trying to interpret the effects of his theology. It would be fair to say that an over-emphasis on election generally robs people of assurance. How is Owen to interpret the fact that so many seem to be believers [regenerate] and at the same time have little or no assurance? For their comfort this practical teaching on assurance is inserted. It appears to me to be only covering up the cracks in a flawed presentation of the gospel. If that presentation cannot give the believer assurance then it is more than likely that there is something wrong with the presentation

and not the recipient of the message. Owen has created an exceptional clause to dodge the issue of an inadequate theology! The following conclusion by Owen is astounding:

"...whoever is in Christ is a new creature...whether they know themselves to be or no. And many are in the dark as to their own condition in this matter all their days..." Book 3 p214.

This then is absurd! It could indicate either a deficiency in ~~the~~ the personality of the person involved, which in some cases would seem reasonable - say from someone who suffered a severe personality disorder. It may also be the responsibility of a wrong emphasis where God's electing and discriminating love is stressed at the expense of a declaration of his universal love for all men.

Owen is at pains to point out what regeneration is not. He argues that regeneration is not just a moral reformation in a person's life. To state that man has the ability to effect such a reformation himself would be a denial of the doctrine of original sin. Owen is certainly on the right course if we are to accept the doctrine of original and inherited sin. It would however seem a far stronger argument to have stated that the basis of his point against a moral reformation is equated as

stating that the essence of regeneration is restoration ie that a sinner is restored to a relationship with God. Owen does however go on to argue that the person who is regenerate does become a partaker of the "divine nature" and as such has renewed faculties with renewed dispositions towards God, holiness etc. He sees man as being a partaker in the divine nature from the point that before regeneration he had totally lost the image of God and thus is in need of this drastic work of the Holy Spirit.

Evidence of Regeneration

How does one know whether or not they are regenerate? There will be certain evidence of this in the believer. The believer will show the fruits of new life. Does this imply that assurance comes from within ourselves and is judged only on the basis of our works? I don't think that Owen would agree with that, but he comes dangerously close to implying it.

What of a person's personal responsibility in this respect? Does the person who is not a Christian just wait and hope for the day that God will pluck him out of darkness and make him

regenerate? This may seem absurd on the face of it, but in Lewis where Hyper-Calvinism is expounded, there is an extreme lack of assurance in the lives of the believers and there are many who wait in a kind of limbo for assurance that they are elect and regenerate. Indeed in many cases a person who claimed to have assurance would be treated with suspicion. Curiously, lack of assurance is almost seen as a sign of grace.

In answer to the question of responsibility, Owen states that people do have duties and responsibilities with regard to their regeneration. They are to read the Word of God. But the Word of God will only be effectual to regeneration for the person if the Holy Spirit chooses to enlighten them [Owen's own argument]. There is the listening to the preaching of the Word of God. In all this it is argued by Owen that people will have to use their minds and make sure that they attend the means of grace. But Owen emphasises again and again that a person can earnestly attend to the means of grace and remain all their lives in an unregenerate state because God has not chosen to work in their lives through the Holy Spirit.

To this last assertion of Owen, one would have to argue back that if someone was seriously and earnestly attending to the

means of grace that that in itself would be the evidence of the Holy Spirit working in their lives and leading them to faith.

Owen gives his definitive understanding of what regeneration is and what effect it has on its recipient.

[a] It is illumination. Due to sin the person who is not a Christian has a darkness of mind and spirit. When they are regenerate they see the meaning of the gospel clearly and are led to an understanding of the truth that brings joy.

[b] There is conviction of sin. The person who is truly regenerate is shown the enormity and the gravity of their offences before God. They are then led to sorrow over their sins and feel a deep sense of humiliation. Without this there can be no assurance in a person's mind that they are regenerate. One wonders if Owen is stating his own experience and making it the norm for everyone rather than presenting a balanced Biblical thesis on the matter of conversion. Where does he derive such a theology from? Does it come from the Bible or simply from his own inner experience? What of the many confessing Christians down through the ages who came to faith through being drawn by the love of God? Are they to be excluded

from the Kingdom because they do not have the same experience as Owen?

[c] There is a reformed life. The person who is regenerate has a new nature and a new desire to love God and please him. Few would argue with that conclusion.

[d] Regeneration and baptism are not to be equated. They may from time to time coincide, but hardly ever. According to Owen, a person is never to put their trust in the external means of baptism as the sign of the regenerate life. He would of course be arguing against an assumption about the sacrament held by some at that time.

[e] Lastly he would state that "God offered no violence or compulsion unto the will of man". He is at pains to point out that....there is, therefore, herein an inward almighty secret act of the power of the Holy Ghost, producing or effecting in us the will of conversion unto God, so acting our wills as that they may^y also act themselves, and that freely". [29].

In order to argue as he does, Owen has to have a firm base to come from if he is to justify the need of efficacious grace. He proves his case along the following lines.

1. Man's nature is depraved in total and entirely beyond human repair.

2. Man is under sin.

3. There is no human cure for man's problem.

4. Man's nature is in need of a change that he is unable to initiate. The cure does not lie hidden in us and is brought to life by God. It is a new life that is given to the person by God.

5. This whole process of new life is the peculiar work of the Holy Spirit. If there is a new birth then it is logical that a person cannot cause their own birth even though they are involved in it. The birth comes from an outside agent. To quote John Murray, "Regeneration is an event of which a person is wholly the subject and not the agent". [30]

Regeneration is therefore necessary for our entry into the Kingdom of God and cannot be obtained by our own faith or even our desire for God. The Holy Spirit is the irresistible, effectual and efficacious source of regeneration. But the whole doctrine of regeneration stands or falls by the doctrine of the

Fall. It is only if man has lost the image of God and is under original sin with inherited unrighteousness, that one can legitimately speak of the necessity of regeneration.

SANCTIFICATION

Sanctification could be referred to as the "deliverance from the pollutions, privations and potency of sin".[31]

In Owen's view of the Spirit's work, regeneration is the means by which the elect are engrafted into the Body of Christ, made right with God and their salvation sealed forever. Owen goes further by asserting that there is also a definitive and progressive sanctification worked in the life of the believer by the Holy Spirit.

Owen argues that it is the Holy Spirit who undertakes to sanctify the elect. To him, it is inconceivable that the Spirit, who is sovereign in the salvation of the elect, should not also be intimately and effectually involved in their sanctification. He would argue, that to accept the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in the sanctification of the elect, is of the greatest assurance to the believer. It ought to persuade the believer, he argues, that God does not leave anything to chance, or to us.

Owen's anthropology is dominated by a doctrine of the total depravity of man. Man is not able to choose to do what is right, and even when he does know what is right, is unable consistently to do what is right. That may at first seem a contradiction, but what Owen is driving at, is that although man, apart from God may appear to do good, but that all his works are in effect evil because they come from a wholly depraved nature. None of man's best works are pleasing to God so long as he stands outside the gospel. When, therefore a person becomes a believer, he is in need of the perpetual activity of the Holy spirit in his life. This does not imply perfection, but is explained in terms of the Holy Spirit prompting and leading the believer into righteousness.

Owen could perhaps be summarised this early on;

All good in us comes from God through the Holy Spirit, but any evil is man's fault.

The Holy Spirit, for Owen, is the author of sanctification. There is no possibility of a person being sanctified unless it comes directly from the Spirit. Owen argues that for us to say that we can be truly holy except in the Holy Spirit, is akin to saying that we do not find our being in God. To Owen it would

be quite wrong for anyone to suggest that they have the potential to be holy from within themselves as this can only come by "especial grace".

"What is from ourselves, or educes from our natural abilities, is not of God in that way; for God is the author of grace, and the best of corrupted nature are opposed..."

What he is saying is that even the best acts of men spring from a heart that is opposed to the absolute rule of God in their lives. Those deeds find no ultimate acceptance from God because of his absolute righteousness. Justifying grace alone can make the sinner acceptable to God. Some good acts might make a person "better" but not in the sense in which that person ever truly and ultimately benefits from such acts outside of a relationship to God. Owen would argue that such good acts will in no way mitigate for the guilt of sinful nature, and the sinner will still be condemned to eternal death.

" Sanctification, as here described is the immediate work of God by his Spirit upon the whole nature, proceeding from the peace made for us by Jesus Christ, whereby, being changed into his likeness, we are kept entirely in peace with God, and are preserved unblamable, or in a state of gracious acceptance with

him, according to the terms of the covenant, unto the end".

[32]

Two Forms of Holiness

There are two kinds of holiness according to Owen - peculiar dedication and the consecration and separation of people to the service of God. This dedication and consecration is the effectual work of the Holy Spirit. Owen then states that there is a real and internal work of the Spirit as he communicates the principles of holiness into the nature of the believer enabling them to perform acts of duty and obedience to God. Holiness is the, "implanting, writing and realising of the gospel in our souls".

True holiness for Owen is designated "evangelical holiness", because it emanates from the Spirit's work of regeneration. This kind of holiness cannot be arrived at through our working at it or through carnal reason. We shall see why Owen insists on this by his two-fold division of sanctification into definitive and progressive. If sanctification were merely to be defined as a progressive understanding and application of the

commands of God into the life of the believer, then it could be solely the responsibility of the believer. However, for Owen, definitive sanctification is his principal concern from which progressive sanctification is the fruit.

Legal Righteousness

Owen then turns to the dangers of legal righteousness as opposed to evangelical holiness. The basis of his argument comes from 1 Corinthians 2:11;

"No-one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God".

Owen insists that it is possible to tell with confidence the legalist and the genuine "evangelical" article apart. For him, it all rests on what happens prior to sanctification in the person's life and experience. The legalist will be consumed by rules and regulations for their own sake and will evidently lack any knowledge or experience of the grace of God. The legalist is identified by the fact that there appears to be some slight reformation in his life. The legalist tries to abstain from some sin or other and can even be quite zealous in the performing of religious duties. None of this, Owen would

argue, is necessarily the result of effectual spiritual light from the Spirit.

A flaw could be detected in Owen's overall thesis. How is it possible ~~of~~ any man to be convicted of sin unless the Spirit gives this light? How is it possible for any man to want holiness unless the Spirit brings such conviction? How can any man effectively carry this through unless the Spirit enabled him to do so? *for*

Evangelical holiness, on the other hand stems from the direct operation of the Holy Spirit as he infuses new spiritual life into the believer, argues Owen. We know the difference between the legalist and the genuine believer because the genuine believer has a knowledge of the grace, mercy and forgiveness of God. The genuine believer does not follow the rules just for their own sake, but obeys God and changes his life because he genuinely seeks to please God. According therefore to Owen, true holiness springs from a relationship to God that has been brought about irresistibly by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit, and not just out of a desire for moral improvement.

Owen sees the necessity ~~of~~ the definitive work of the Holy Spirit, because God, through the Spirit, implants a "new divine *for*

nature". This is a very important point because Owen sees that the image of God is totally lost in the Fall. This image cannot be restored by an adorning of legal righteousness or moral virtue. This image cannot be restored as people try and make recompense for sin or use good works as a way for paying for their sins. The image cannot be restored by people trying somehow to set out to obey they commands of God and imagining that they have the independent ability and power to comply with God's commands. Only the Holy Spirit can restore this lost image; or so Owen argues.

Owen further maintains that God has promised to sanctify his people. God, he argues, knows that we do not have an ability within ourselves to be sanctified in a way that is acceptable to him. When God commands people to be holy, he is asking them to do something which they are not able by nature to do. Owen closes his argument at this point by saying that whatever it is in our power to attain, it is not that holiness that God requires of us. Only the Spirit can produce this effect.

"To be cleansed from the defilements of sin, whatever they be, to have a heart inclined, disposed, enabled, to fear the Lord always, and to walk in all his ways and statutes accordingly, with an internal habitual conformity of the whole soul unto the

Law of God, is to be sanctified or to be holy. And all this God compriseth directly to work in us and to accomplish himself".[33]

Man is therefore in need of the especial grace of the Spirit because;

"It is the Holy Spirit who is the immediate peculiar sanctified of all believers and the author of holiness in them".[34]

*Sentence
Correct?*

To sum up Owen's position,

" Sanctification is an immediate work of the Holy Spirit on the souls of believers, purifying and cleansing of their natures from the pollution and uncleanness of sin, renewing in them the image of God, and thereby enabling them, from a spiritual and habitual principle of grace, to yield obedience unto God, according unto the tenor and terms of the new covenant, by virtue of the life and death of Jesus Christ...it is the universal renovation of our natures by the Holy Spirit into the image of God through Jesus Christ". [35].

To Owen sanctification is therefore the purifying and cleansing from sin of the believer. The believer is cleansed from the pollution of sin by the Spirit and this enables him to walk obediently with God. The Spirit is the cleanser and what he applies are the benefits of the death and blood of Jesus Christ. In his thinking there hardly seems to be a distinction, if any, between regeneration and definitive sanctification, though he treats them as separate doctrines and issues.

Progressive Sanctification

What then of progressive sanctification? Owen sees two issues in tension here. For him, there is a divine and a human aspect to progressive sanctification, but for him, the foundation and the initiative is always with the Holy Spirit.

"In the sanctification of believers, the Holy Spirit doth work in them, in their whole souls, their minds, wills, and affections, a gracious, supernatural habit, principle, and disposition of living unto God; wherein the substance or essence, the life and being, of holiness doth consist".[36]

It is on the question of how the believer freely chooses to do that which is good, that Owen expounds his thinking on free will, and it is therefore worth quoting extensively;

" Believers have free will unto that which is spiritually good; for they are freed from the bondage and slavery unto sin which they were under in the state of nature...

All that the Scripture says about free will is, that in the state of nature, antecedent unto the converting, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, all [^]en whatever are in bondage unto sin, and that in all the faculties of their souls... *men?*

On the other side, in those who are renewed by the Holy spirit and sanctified, it acknowledgeth and teacheth a freedom of will, not in any indifferency and flexibility unto good and evil, but in a power and ability to like, love, choose, and cleave unto God and his will in all things...

The difference about free will is reduced unto these heads:

1st. Whether there be a power in man 'indifferently' to determine himself his choice and all his actings, to this or that, good or evil, one thing or another, independently of the will, power and providence of God? This indeed we deny, as that which is inconsistent with the prescience, authority, decrees and dominion of God, and as that which would prove certainly ruinous and destructive to ourselves.

2nd. Whether there be in men unregenerate, not renewed by the Holy Spirit, a freedom, power, and ability unto that which is 'spiritually good' or to believe and obey according to the mind and will of God? This we also deny as that which is absolutely destructive to the grace of Christ.

3rd. Whether the freedom of will that in believers do consist in an indifferency and freedom from any determination only, with a power equally ready for good or evil, according as the will shall determine itself? Or whether it consist in a gracious freedom and ability to choose, will and do that which is spiritually good in opposition to the bondage and slavery unto sin wherein we were before detained".[37].

Owen therefore suggests that man has no genuine free will [at least according to his understanding of free will] before he is regenerate. Man is imprisoned under the power of sin and this is an imprisonment which only the efficacious work of the Holy Spirit can break. Once broken, the regenerate, and thus sanctified man experiences genuine free will for the first time. But this is not a freedom of the will to choose equally to do good or evil - it is a freedom dominated by an inward desire firmly and sovereignly set there by the Holy Spirit to do that which is good and pleasing to God. This then immediately raises the question of the fact that believers, in

whom the Spirit presumably dwells, fall into sin - sometimes with disastrous consequences. Would it not have been better of Owen to suggest that the Holy Spirit lets the regenerate person see clearly the distinction between good and evil, and implant a desire for what is good, thus enabling the believer for the first time to make a free choice between good and evil?

Such a position also leaves us with the problem of man's will apart from being regenerate. If it is only sanctification that restores what was completely lost and sets in motion true freedom, is the person who is outside of Christ not free? Owen would say no. He would argue that fallen man because of his total and comprehensive depravity of nature is not free to choose equally between good and evil. He is not also free because God has not chosen, through the Spirit, to set him free.

Almost predictably in book 5, of volume 3, Owen cannot but help going back to the doctrine of Predestination;

"God hath ordained none to salvation, but he hath ordained them antecedently to be holy. Not the least infant goes out of this world shall come to eternal rest unless it be sanctified, and so be made habitually and radically holy.." [38]

The implication of this would be admitted to mean by Owen that many infants left this world for eternal damnation because they were not sanctified and others who were elect departed to eternal rest! Owen, therefore, driven by the domination of predestination over the whole of his theology is almost forced into what seems an absurd conclusion concerning the fate and destiny of infants - and depending on one's view of it, the unborn or aborted child.

According to Owen, not only is a man elect, but he is elect to regeneration. Beyond that, he is elect to a definitive act of sanctification through the Holy Spirit and even good works are preordained so that the glory for them is fully ascribed to God alone. There is little room for free will or a sense of achievement, except in a very qualified sense, in this very closed theological statement. If a person has no two-way freedom to choose good or evil in what sense does progressive sanctification exist? Surely the omnipotent God, through the Holy Spirit, does not have to struggle to overcome our depravity? How can Owen therefore speak of , or imply, progressive sanctification?

One might rightly ask what the main difference between regeneration, Sanctification and Justification is in the

theology of Owen. On the question of justification, Owen simply restates most of what he says on Regeneration and sanctification. However, with regard to the work of the Spirit re the Eternal decree, Owen does not place the same emphasis as he does in Regeneration.

Owen's main thrust on Justification is to emphasise the total corruption of the sinful nature,

"Some deny the deprivation and corruption of our nature, which ensued from our apostacy from God, and the loss of his image"
[39]

He therefore re-emphasises the utter sinfulness of man and says that unless this has been impressed upon man, he cannot possibly want salvation. Conviction of sin has got to be prior to justification and therefore regeneration. Without this a person can never become a Christian.

Owen concentrates more on the person and the work of Christ in book 5 than he does on the divine decree. He does however state that the faith that God gives is to his elect.

ASSURANCE

We can never have 100% assurance of anything or anyone, but the Christian wants above all else to be as sure as possible that he is loved by God. This assurance is supposed to come from the Holy spirit, but one of the problems that Owen's theology of election and the Holy Spirit, raises, is that it appears to undermine the potential assurance of the believer.

Assurance is not a topic that can easily exist in the realm of speculative theology - it is too practical for that. It is the search by the sincere to be assured that they are right with God, loved by God, and are the possessors of eternal life. Without this assurance the follower of Christ is either led to despair or abandonment of the faith. Owen, it is claimed by Ferguson in his book on Owen and the Christian Life, is essentially a practical theologian. One would therefore imagine that his thinking on assurance and the work of the Holy Spirit would lead to a deepening of faith and real Christian vigour - but does it?

The problem with Owen, as with the Confession, lies in what is central to their theology. They both clearly advocate a doctrine of limited atonement and election as central to their

theology. This even dominates their understanding with regard to the role of the Holy Spirit in assurance.

The Problem Stated

If God elects who is to be saved and determines who is to be reprobate, and the Holy Spirit is both the saving and hardening agent that God uses to carry out his perfect and completed will in election, through the limited atonement of Jesus Christ, how can a person be sure that they are right with God and accepted by him? Does a predominant doctrine of election and limited atonement in the sense in which the Holy Spirit irresistibly applies the saving benefits of Christ to the believer, detract from assurance rather than establish and enhance it?

If a person is elect, how do they know that they are elect? A person is forced to look for evidence, but where is such evidence to be found in order to establish whether or not a person is elect?

Calvin and Owen

For this part of the study, I would like to do a comparative study of Calvin and Owen on the nature of faith and assurance. the problem is one of identifying what to look for in such a study - some ground rule or principle that will enable us to appreciate the similarities and differences between the two theologians. Many would, perhaps wrongly, assume that because Owen found himself in a predominantly Calvinistic tradition, that his views would identically reflect those of Calvin.

Two ground principles to examine

1. If God loves the whole world and not just an elect group within it, then a person can have the assurance that if they come to God in faith, they will be fully accepted by him. Faith will be fully assured because it will be based on an objective certainty that lies outside the realm of personal feelings, and in a declared word and action from God
2. If God only loves the elect and his means of saving this limited group taken from all of human kind is Christ's atoning

work as it is effectually applied by the Holy Spirit, how is it ever possible for a person to be sure that they belong to this elect group? How can a person, under the remit of this limitation know for sure whether or not they are loved by God or belong to this group that has its number set from before the creation of the world? Faith, in this respect, will find it very difficult to rest on any objective base, even though such a base may exist. The believer will be looking for subjective feelings or experiences either within themselves or from outwith themselves to surely establish whether or not God truly loves them. ^Tthe believer in this respect will not rest on faith alone and the resultant discipleship that follows, but will be continually looking for evidence to satisfy his need for assurance. Faith and assurance will always be tentative. T

I am indebted to Charles Bell [Calvin and Scottish Theology] for clarifying many of the relevant issues surrounding Calvin's view of faith and assurance. Bell's basic question in examining Calvin's theology is, /

"Does God love the world or only the elect?"

Bell cites Kendall's book, Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649, to prove his main thesis that universal atonement is

fundamental to Calvin's doctrine of assurance. Kendall is at pains to point out that he is not a universalist in the sense that he believes in the universal salvation of all people. In his argument for universal atonement in Calvin's theology, Kendall clearly believes that Calvin believes in the universal appeal of the gospel. He further asserts that Calvin believed that through the Cross all were to be offered sincerely by God, forgiveness. Bell quotes Kendall,

"If Christ did not die for the sins of all men then we cannot be certain that our sins are forgiven!"[40]

Kendall is at pains to quote Calvin as widely as possible,

"Fundamental to the doctrine of faith, in John Calvin, is his belief that Christ died indiscriminately for all men"[41]

Kendall believes Calvin's position to be that Christ died for all and is offered to all, but not all receive him. Christ died for all but not all are saved. Kendall therefore argues Calvin was an exponent of universal atonement and that the doctrine of

limited atonement so central to English Calvinism was in fact derived from the strong influence of Beza.

Beza, Kendall argues believes that Christ died only for the elect - the atonement is thus limited. Perkins, who ~~is~~ deeply influential ^{was} to Puritan thought assumes that Beza and Calvin are of one mind on this issue, argues Kendall, and so the confusion arises. To Calvin, faith is assurance whereas to the Puritans, faith and assurance are separate entities. The Puritan's do not derive their doctrine of atonement and assurance from Calvin, but from Beza.

Helm's book, Calvin and the Calvinists was a defensive response to Kendall's book. Helm argues that Kendall has not understood Calvin. He gives a summation of Kendall's thesis in page 9 of his book, in a table form. It is worth quoting this in full, as it perhaps highlights the differences that Kendall makes.

CALVIN

General Atonement

|

Faith as a passive persuasion.

|

Faith including assurance.

|

The gospel before the law.

|

Faith before repentance.

|

Salvation by grace through faith.

PURITANISM

Limited Atonement

|

Faith as an act of the will.

|

Faith does not necessarily include assurance.

|

Preparation for grace.

|

The law before gospel

|

Repentance before faith.

|

Salvation through good endeavours.

#Helm Page 9.

Helm points out that Kendall has misunderstood Calvin and that Calvin does advocate actual remission, and that it is only the elect who have their sins remitted. Helm says that it was

Calvin's belief that Christ only atoned for the elect. Helm's examination is not as wide as that of Kendall, in that he only appeals to the Institutes. It would appear that Helm's summation of Kendall's thesis is good, and that Kendall's thesis is a fair reflection of Calvin and the English Calvinists.

Bell argues that Calvin begins his theology by believing that the offer of forgiveness and the extent of the atonement are both universal. Contrary to what many might think, Bell would argue that Calvin's theology is not dominated by the double decree. Accordingly, the problem is not therefore man's sin, because Christ has died for the sins of all men. The problem, so far as humanity is concerned, is whether or not people will accept God's love and forgiveness through Christ. The offer to all men is sincere, and is based on the universal nature of the atonement, but not all will participate in it. To quote Bell,

"Christ's death, according to Calvin, was an expiation for the sins of the entire world, but the benefit of the atonement requires applicaion and this comes through the work of the Holy Spirit, whose gifts to us are saving faith and participation in the life and work of Christ." [42]

The place of faith in Calvin's theology is therefore central. Faith is much more to Calvin than an objective, intellectual assent - it is a knowledge of God. Faith rests on the promises of God as found in the Scriptures. It is therefore both an intellectual and an emotional response to God's offer of forgiveness and new life.

All of the above is very positive. Faith is seen as the positive response in man to the God who has come to him in Christ, and who now in and through the Holy Spirit comes to offer the full benefits and comforts of his love. Faith ought therefore to be assured and immediate - immediate assurance in the sense that the believer is certain of God's acceptance and love.

To Calvin, some knowledge of God still remains in man. It may be, to him, a pretty perverse knowledge that is based on ignorance and presumption, but some knowledge of God still remains. What knowledge remains is in need of renewal through the Holy Spirit and this renewal is immediate to faith. This is a very different view from that taken by Owen. To Owen, man has lost completely the image of God and only the regenerating work of the Spirit, as he effectually, totally and irresistibly works in the life of the individual, can this image be born in man -

and only then to the elect who God has ^{pre}destined to receive this. Calvin, on the other hand, would maintain that the image of God still exists within all men, even though it may be severely corrupted. It is to this image that the truth of the gospel is communicated, based on a universal atonement through which is offered freely to all the gifts of forgiveness and eternal life.

It would be quite wrong to give the impression that Calvin placed no emphasis on election, but it was hardly the starting point in his theological emphasis. The foundation of his theology is that it is possible for man to come to a knowledge of God and that God, through the Holy Spirit and the Word, communicates the merits and works of Christ, offering to all the forgiveness of sins. Faith ought therefore to bring immediate assurance that a person is right with God. In essence faith and assurance ought never to be separated as one follows immediately upon the other.

Owen, on the other hand would not agree that faith and assurance always go together. He would maintain that sometimes assurance follows years after faith is exercised, and in many cases there are believers who never have assurance. This is exactly the problem that a predominance of the doctrine of

election raises. It leaves the believer asking, "How can I be sure, I am one of God's children?". The predominance of this doctrine causes a high degree of uncertainty among many believers. Not uncertainty with regard to the existence and moral character of God, but uncertainty as to whether they personally are truly loved by God. This in effect raises the whole question about whether the gospel does in fact cause such uncertainty to come about, and if not, one wonders where this places the theology of Owen, and possibly the Confession!

Sinclair Ferguson maintains that Owen's doctrine of assurance is based on Psalm 130:4 - "There is forgiveness with thee that thou mayest be feared." [43]

As we take up Owen's position, we begin to see that assurance does not just come from a person's personal response to the atonement, but also from an inner searching to see if, or not, they are part of the limited elect in Christ. Owen would maintain that it is possible to be falsely assured of salvation and to assume that one has received forgiveness when in fact this is not the case. Thus begins an inner search to find out if a person is truly forgiven.

How then can Owen tell the presumptuous from the truly forgiven person? This has to be done by rigorous inner self-examination. According to Owen, if a person hates sin, that is a sign of the genuine working of the Holy Spirit. But does this self-examination to see if the believer truly hates sin, lead to assurance? How does a person know if they hate sin enough? How do we define both sin and hatred of sin? How do we judge in a borderline case when someone is backsliding? Did the prodigal son hate sin or was he just down on his luck and out of funds - he hated what had happened to him more than he hated sin? Does it matter anyway, because in coming back to the Father, he experienced his love? If we are to follow Owen's thinking, then there are a minefield of difficult questions to be resolved. We have to ask whether or not this theology of assurance, at least in part through inner self-examination, to identify the true work of the Holy Spirit, is the truly Biblical way to find assurance.

True forgiveness, Owen would argue, comes from knowing God in his awesomeness. To create a need for God's forgiveness, the Law must first be preached in order to make people realise their need for mercy. Even in this search for forgiveness based on the need for mercy when confronted by the awesomeness of God, Owen warns that one has to be careful. People are not to

desire forgiveness just to escape God's wrath, but rather in order to come to know, obey and love God. The problem of examining motive in man, lies in Owen's own doctrine of man. If man is so totally, irreversibly, utterly and absolutely as corrupt as Owen maintains, how can he expect a person to act out of the purest motives in their response to God? Would God expect this anyway? Of course it could be argued that the Holy Spirit would create the pure motive when he regenerates the old man and so the argument is closed. Those who have pure motives in coming to God for forgiveness can be sure of their salvation.

But even in the regenerate man, in his thesis on Mortification of Sin, Owen admits that such pure motives do not exist. This then is evidence of the failure of Owen's theology to find an adequate doctrine of assurance. Indeed, the further he delves, the more we see that his evidences for assurance create more problems than they solve. Could it not be argued that God does not expect the purest motives from us, and that grace simply means that he accepts us even in all of our twisted sinfulness? Surley a desire for mercy is going to contain certain mixed motives in everyone?

For Owen, therefore, faith does not guarantee assurance and assurance is not something that is easily arrived at. Assurance is something to be longed after, waited for, and inwardly sought after. This though leads to severe introspection rather than outwardly to Christ. It means too that a great deal of time is spend pondering over what ought to be initial Christian experience - almost, if not entirely in some cases, stunting Christian growth and discipleship. Surely it is evident that the work of the Holy Spirit is to lead people to Christ and not into themselves? Owen takes no account of personality differences ie it is obvious that an insecure person will always respond differently to a person who has an extrovert personality. Perhaps there was not available the same degree of insight into the human personality as there is today, but surely it is basic that there are different personality types who will react differently to the same news!

To establish his argument that faith and assurance do not always go together, Owen argues that the fruit of the Spirit will produce infallible assurance. One suspects that we are beginning to move away from salvation through grace alone, to an evidence that gives assurance through works. To Owen, a person's faith will be verified by whether or not they display the fruit of the Spirit. If there is the fruit of the Spirit,

then that is a sign of the sovereign work of the Spirit in salvation and progressive sanctification. But again, though it is possible to see some merit in Owen's argument, it fails to take account of personality differences. Eg A ^{people} person who ^{are} is naturally hard on themselves and a bit of a perfectionist, will never have assurance if they accept Owen's theology, because no matter how good they become, it will never be good enough. On the other hand, a person with an easy going, affable personality could be very different and less riorous, show less sign of the fruit of the Spirit, but have more assurance. Such a way of establishing assurance may serve in many cases to lead to despair or Pharisaism - or both!

Owen would argue that assurance is often not found immediately because after a long struggle to find it, the believer values it more. Perhaps Owen is making a theology out of his own experience or the experiences of a few other people, and that is always a dangerous course. This perhaps says more to us about a doctrinal deficiency based on experience rather than a theology based in Scripture. Whatever the case such a view is highly dangerous because of the casualty list that it leaves behind - people who have given up in despair because they could never find real assurance.

Owen does place safeguards on his view of assurance and in this respect he does differ from some other Puritan thinkers. He warns against self-determination and points out that Christ, His Word and the Holy Spirit are to be our judge - especially when the believer finds faith difficult. But how, in the scheme of his theology, are we to know what Christ, His Word and the Holy Spirit are saying to us if we have no assurance whether we are elect or not? His suggestion is good, but placed within the wrong theological framework for it to have any real significance or practical effect.

Finally, Owen points out that the Holy Spirit, at the time of conversion will give a very deep sense of sin and guilt and will convict people of the judgement of God and the immanence of Hell. If people bear this inner conviction then they can be assured that this is the work of the Holy Spirit. He encourages the believer to be patient when he begins to feel despondant about his lack of assurance. However, it must be said that it is entirely possible for a person to feel guilty, sinful, under God's judgement and have a real fear of Hell, without them ever coming to the commitment of discipleship. The other problem with this approach of Owen, is that it is an appeal to a person's feelings. What about the person who has come to know God through being drawn into grace by the love of God rather

than through a deep sense of depravity? Is that person incomplete, or worse, not a Christian at all, because they lack Owen's experience? It seems as if the whole issue is one where the personal experience of one person, or a group of people, as they experience God in their lives and understand their theology, make that the indispensable norm for everyone. Was not that the essence of Pharisaism?

Last of all, with regard to assurance, I want examine the sealing of the Spirit. many of the Puritan theologians believed that assurance is produced by a subjective experience of the Holy ^S spirit subsequent to conversion and this was known as the sealing of the Spirit. Calvin, on the other hand, would maintain that it was impossible to believe without being sealed by the Spirit whereas some of the Puritans would envisage that sealing is an experience subsequent to conversion. This is supposed to be the ultimate in Christian assurance. It is something that is to be patiently longed for, but this experience is given sovereignly to some believers while others may never have it. This view has lately been espoused by the modern Puritan thinker, M. Lloyd-Jones in Joy Unspeakable. Jones believes that he is faithful to many of the Puritans and that he is reflecting their theology. Assurance is therefore

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viewed as something that is much more subjective than we might have imagined.

Owen may not fully have agreed with this teaching on the sealing of the Spirit, but he agrees with what it implies - a Christian is not often immediately assured at the moment of faith and is in need of some subsequent experience to grant him assurance. Assurance is therefore a problem that is not adequately solved by Owen because of his view of the conditional love of God.

Conclusions

We have to ask whether the view of Owen and the Confession can be regarded as authentically Biblical and Christian. Both the Confession and Owen deny man the right and freedom to choose God. God compels man to believe but only if he is elect. Then there is a strict view of limited atonement where the gospel can have no universal appeal and God does not love the world after all, but only those he has chosen from all eternity. It is very difficult to see how the Confession and Owen are compatible with authentic Christianity on most points regarding the work of the Spirit.

What problems arise out of a theology that states that man is utterly corrupt, having lost the image of God; man has no freedom to believe; God loves only the elect; the Holy Spirit must regenerate and sanctify before a person can enter the kingdom; and that assurance comes through patient waiting?

We have already identified one of the problems as lack of assurance, but what other difficulties arise from this lack of assurance? It first of all creates a distorted view of God that

is different from that of the New Testament. This view of God shows him as reluctant to bring comfort and assurance, and very often it is only when the soul is most tortured that God will grant assurance. Is this the case? One would hardly think so. Jesus, again and again emphasised the love, compassion and care of God and counselled people to be sure of this. Assurance in the New Testament is based on faith exercising itself on an objective Word from God ie

"God loved the world so much that he sent his only son so that whoever believed in him should not perish but receive eternal life." John 3:16.

The elitism of the Confession and Owen creates a distorted view of God that is far from its Calvinistic roots. It is not the Christian God that is spoken of who is just, loving and dependable, but an arbitrary God who is selective and withholding in his comfort.

What effect does this distorted view have on those who are exposed to its teaching? The first thing that it does for many people is to drive them away from the faith altogether. Instead of seeing the Holy Spirit as a friend, he is seen as the great enemy of faith. Many of these people have genuinely come to

believe and become children of God, but they are able to see this because this teaching can grant them no assurance. They fear they can never know assurance and so they give up in despair. If then the command of Jesus was to feed the sheep then surely this kind of theology has the effect of starving them of true feeding.

This form of theology also has the effect of breeding arrogance in its proponents. Those who are the elect, have a sense of calling and thus only they are right. They equate election with a "few" getting into the Kingdom. Entrance into the Kingdom is not so much by faith but through believing the right things. It is remarkable that Owen is able to be so uncharitable to others who saw the operations of the Spirit differently but had the same evangelical beliefs.

Practical Effects on the Believer

The Confession and Owen also was responsible for uncertainty in the believer. If the believer could not be certain of God's love, then what could they be certain of? This leads to a very dark and dismal view of the world and the providence of God. The world is a dark and fearful place rather than God's world

to enjoy. The psychological effect of this theological/philosophical mind-set is enormous. The believing person lacks confidence and inner peace and is much more likely to exhibit that in an excessive way. This is seen in:

[a] Intolerance of any other view but their own. So insecure was their own view that to admit to any other would have intolerably undermined their own.

[b] Excesses in the rigours of devotions - almost as a way of self-satisfaction in order to cover up an already deficient faith.

[c] Excessive works for the Kingdom of God in order to prove to God that they are worthy to be elect!

There is no enjoyment of God and peace within. This uncertainty too, often creates such psychological instability that it leads to mental breakdowns.

Allied to this is the despair that can be caused. It is a despair that often leads to fatalism. People often see themselves as so bad [total depravity] that it is impossible to be loved by God. Among such hyper-calvinist groups it is almost a virtue for the disciple to see himself as worthless. But if this is perpetuated, it leads to despair - it is as if they

have been imprisoned in uncertainty and someone has thrown the key away. One of the few ways of coping, though not resolving this despair, is to be fatalistic and hope that it may turn out in the end. Thus, one hears such comments as, "Well, if I am elect, I am elect, and there is nothing much I can do about it." Astonishingly, God has become something other than the God of the New Testament.

Allied to this is self-preoccupation. The disciple of hyper-calvinism becomes introvert and preoccupied with his own personal search for assurance and salvation. He is not so much concerned with good works because that could be "dangerous" and so what often happens is that this character almost denies the character of a Christian - this in the sense that rather than being preoccupied with the royal law of Love, he has degenerated into the opposite in his search for inner meaning. In this vain inner search, two things develop,

[a] A chronic lack of self-worth. The view of Owen and the Confession on man paints such a black picture that if there is any worth in man it is there because God has put it there. The believer dare not feel good about himself, congratulate himself for good works etc because that is a sin. He is unworthy and any good is there because of God, so the glory must be given to god, while he feels bad about himself for being proud.

[b] A chronic lack of self-confidence. We are not allowed to like or love ourselves or feel any sense of achievement for a fear of placing confidence in ourselves rather than in God. This lack of personal confidence is seen in guidance. There is a fear of making a decision in case it is not the will of God. This view almost denied the existence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer but also suggests that the believer has no independent right to decision making.

One of the other great flaws of this theology is the individualism that develops from it. It may not have been the intention of Owen or the writers of the Confession to help perpetuate the demon of individualism, but this is what develops out of their theology. The Church is not seen as the body in the sense that there is a genuine body ministry. The preoccupation is to ascertain what the true church is and whether or not one belongs to it or not. The church becomes a group of people preoccupied with a personal search for assurance and salvation - for what makes them feel good and better about themselves. Subconsciously, evangelism and the extending of God's Kingdom is not the priority it should be because evangelism is the priority of the Spirit who will save the elect anyway!

This theological view begins slowly but surely to drift into Pharisaism and elitism. It is unavoidable. Jesus accused the Pharisees of making salvation difficult for people even though they did not lack religious zeal. It inevitably degenerates into a host of rules and regulations and distances itself from the pure essence of the universal declaration of God's love in Christ. Such groups become inward looking, defensive, aggressive towards anyone who disagrees on the slightest point and unbending.

What of the Westminster Confession of faith as a document and Owen as a theologian? The essence of the Confession is the double decree and the Spirit's application of it. To say the least, it is a gross distortion of Scripture and at the very worst it is guilty of proclaiming "another gospel" which as Paul would put it, is "no gospel at all". Is it such a distortion of the Christian faith that it is not Christian at all? It is certainly removed from Calvin and the essence of his teaching.

What of Owen? Most of the criticisms of the Confession apply to him too. What Owen has done, is to develop the basic tenants of the Confession into a full blown theological exegesis. One fears that in his pains to defend and develop his position,



Owen again and again goes beyond Scripture. What he does seem to do is to take a non-Scriptural position and try to defend it. In his defence, he has a logical enough mind to create a defence for his theology, but in so doing distances himself from the Bible's teaching on God, Atonement, Anthropology and Pneumatology.

What can be said of both Owen and the Confession is that they were both engaged in a comprehensive attempt to define the Christian faith in order to provide a standard of faith, but both failed to do so adequately because the theological perceptions that underlined their theology were at best flawed and at worst non-Christian.

