

# **The Bond of Grace and Duty**

**In the Soteriology of John Owen**



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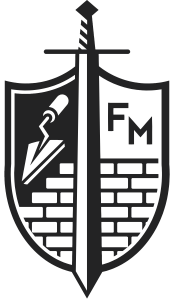
By  
**Philip A. Craig**

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# Foreword

John Owen, the greatest biblical, systematic and spiritual theologian among the Puritans, named and profiled the people he wrote against as little as he well could. He was an expert controversialist when he had to be, but clearly he thought that solid exposition of biblical truth on each topic, elbowing error aside as he came to it and then leaving it behind, was under ordinary circumstances the most God-honoring and reader-edifying path to follow. That explains how it has been possible until now, amid the renaissance of Owen studies that recent years have seen, to miss the fact that the distorted version of Reformed Christianity that was then called Antinomianism was one of the targets at which Owen aimed his arrows when he wrote on the Christian life.

The present volume, however, goes far to fill this gap in our understanding of Owen's agenda. Philip Craig's analysis shows very clearly what was at issue here, and how completely and crushingly, without naming names, Owen outflanks and undercuts this widespread Puritan form of easy-believism. It is a thorough, painstaking and definitive piece of work that carries more of a message for the church of our time than doctoral theses usually do.

The link between grace and duty that Owen spells out with such consistency is the characteristic Puritan understanding of the Reformed conjunction of Word and Spirit as the twofold means whereby God imparts to sinful human beings the new life of knowing, serving and glorifying himself through the mediatorial ministry of Jesus Christ our Lord. Dr. Craig's elucidation of this central motif in Owen's thinking lets the great Puritan speak across the centuries to recall us all to the true roots of personal piety and pastoral reality—the things that, when all is said and done, always matter most for the people of God. Thoughtful persons who care about the renewing of God's church in these days will find what is written here an extremely valuable resource, and one calculated to lead them into the yet more fruitful exercise of reading and engaging with Owen for themselves.

What a privilege it is to introduce and commend such a worth-while book as this.

J. I. Packer





# 1

## Owen's Doctrine of Preparation For Grace and Glory

### John Owen and His Influence

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

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

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

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

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

## John Owen's Theology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Puritan Doctrine of Preparation For Grace

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

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

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

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

Preparation for grace is not a Puritan innovation but can be traced back to Martin Luther (1583–1646), who considers that the “emphatically necessary and serious” preparatory work of the law enlightens the unregenerate to face up to their delusion of spiritual freedom, the stark reality of their bondage to sin, and their desperate need for Christ:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>11</sup> Westminster Confession sections 3.6 and 10.1.

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

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

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

### Calvin versus the Calvinists?

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

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

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

<sup>15</sup> Gerstner and Gerstner, "Edwardsean Preparation," 6.

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

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

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



in the process of regeneration, that man must be prepared at all—including by the work of the Law prior to faith.<sup>19</sup>

To determine whether Kendall has misconstrued Calvin's position, this study will examine briefly Calvin's two most relevant works: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and recently translated *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*.

### Calvin's Rejection of the Nominalist View of Preparation

In *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin denied self- or meritorious preparation (preparationism). Because human seeking is always preceded "by the impulsion of the Holy Spirit," Calvin exclaims, "Away then with all that 'preparation'!" Here we ought to guard against two things: (1) not to say that lawful use of the first grace is rewarded by later graces, as if man by his own effort rendered God's grace effective; or (2) so to think of the reward as to cease to consider it from God's free grace.<sup>20</sup>

Further development of Calvin's thought about preparation for grace found expression in *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will* (1543), his reply to Roman Catholic theologian Albert Pighius (c. 1490–1542), who apparently (His treatise has still not been translated.) held a semi-Pelagian view of conversion:

He thinks that God does stretch out his hand to fallen humanity to raise them up, but only to those who long to be raised up and do not neglect the grace which is available to help them, but rather lay hold of it, try with its help to return to God, desire to be saved by him, and hope for this—those who deliver themselves to him to be healed, enlightened and saved.<sup>21</sup>

Calvin argues, like Luther, that owing to the bondage of the will, "man cannot prepare himself by his natural powers to receive the grace of God."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 26. Kendall hedges his statement by admitting that Calvin states that the law can prepare men "to seek what previously they did not realize they had." But Kendall minimizes the value of this preparation by calling it merely "an accidental effect of the law."

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II.ii.26–27 and II.iii.11.

<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defense of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 187–88.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 26.



Accordingly, man “cannot seek anything but evil”<sup>23</sup> and brings to the salvation equation only his sin, total depravity<sup>24</sup> and “crooked will.”<sup>25</sup> Following Augustine, Calvin interprets John 6:44 to mean that God’s drawing prepares the will prior to any human preparation.<sup>26</sup> He insists that “God is not induced by our preparation to bestow his grace upon us, but in every way he goes before us.”<sup>27</sup> In a comment denying self-preparation, Calvin gleans from Romans chapter 3:

But who cannot see that ... it is not in man's power to prepare himself to receive the grace of God, but his whole conversion is the gift of God? ... For when the Lord promises that he will give us a heart of flesh in place of our heart of stone, what room is left for preparation? How shall he who is made willing instead of unwilling, ready to obey instead of rebellious and obstinate, claim for himself the praise for his preparation? This is no less declared in the following words: ‘I was found by those who did not seek me.’ For even though the prophet is speaking about the calling of the Gentiles, yet in it he exhibits the universal pattern of the calling of all of us.<sup>28</sup>

### The Importance of Preparation for Grace in Calvin's Theology

If then, as Calvin asserted, the will is passive in conversion, does it automatically follow that human activity has no place? Surprisingly, it does not. In the *Institutes*, Book 2, Chapter 1, Calvin developed, in tandem with certain related doctrines, the doctrine of seeking or preparation for grace. The first related doctrine is that of original sin: a comparison of human nature before and after the Fall should “truly overwhelm us and fill us with shame” and thereby “kindle a new zeal to seek God, in whom each of us may recover those good things which we have utterly and completely lost.”<sup>29</sup> The second related doctrine is that of the bondage of the will. Calvin advocates self-examination, not self-complacency: “God’s truth requires us to seek in examining ourselves...the kind of knowledge that will strip off all confidence in our own ability, deprive us of all occasion for

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 49, quoting Augustine. Total depravity means that the noetic effects of sin, stemming from the Fall, extend to every human faculty (including reason), not that man is as bad as he can possibly be (*ibid.*, 213).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 110, 131–32, 153, 176.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 173–74.

<sup>29</sup> *Institutes*, II.i.1.

boasting, and lead us to submission.<sup>30</sup> Only self-examination according to the “standard of divine judgment” will lead to salutary self-despair.”<sup>31</sup> In language echoing Romans chapter 8, Calvin stresses that a before-and-after comparison of human nature relative to the Fall should compel us, by recognizing our unworthiness, to seek God:

Yet God would not have us forget our original nobility, which ... ought truly to arouse in us a zeal for righteousness and goodness. For we cannot think upon either our first condition or ... purpose ...without being prompted to meditate upon immortality, and to yearn after the Kingdom of God. ...It is that from which we have been completely estranged, so that sick of our miserable lot we groan, and in groaning we sigh for that lost worthiness.<sup>32</sup>

This emphasis on the importance of seeking God, even by the unregenerate, continues apace in *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*. According to Calvin, God’s commandments, far from implying human ability, demand the impossible “with the very intention that we should know what we ought to seek from him. For it is faith which obtains by prayer what the law commands.”<sup>33</sup> Commenting on Hebrews 11:6, he emphasizes that human seeking of God should be an all-consuming activity:

Nor do we deny that the struggle ... involve[s] the utmost difficulty and ... require[s] the greatest ... dedication. The question is only whether we fight for God with our own strength, or He supplies from heaven the strength. It is not that we ourselves do nothing or that we without any movement of our will are driven to act by pressure from him, but that we act while being acted upon by him. We will as he guides the heart, we endeavor as he rouses us, we succeed in endeavor as he gives us strength, so that we are animate and living tools, while he is the leader and finisher of the work.<sup>34</sup>

## God’s Benevolent Blessing of Human Seeking

Calvin also mentions that God’s propensity to reward seeking operates on the ground of grace, not merit. “I grant that believers are to expect this blessing of God: that the better use they have made of the prior graces, the more may the following graces be increased. But I say also this reward

<sup>30</sup> *Institutes*, II.i.2.

<sup>31</sup> *Institutes*, II.i.3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Bondage and Liberation*, 142.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

arises from his free benevolence.”<sup>35</sup> Calvin developed his treatment of this theme more thoroughly in *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*. Though against preparationism, he still points out that God graciously—and not meritoriously—rewards the improvement of grace:

On the basis of the [parable of the talents] repaid with interest, [Pighius] claims that God rewards the right use of earlier ones by [the gift of] later ones. But I have never denied this absolutely; I have only added this qualification, that a twofold danger must be avoided: God should not be believed to reward the right use of his grace as if man, by his own efforts, rendered the grace which is offered to him effective; and the rewarding should not be thought of in such a way that the grace is no longer gratuitous. On the contrary, the parable should be interpreted [as saying] that God constantly follows up his earlier gifts in us with new and greater ones.<sup>36</sup>

## The Preparatory Work of the Law

Contrary to Kendall's claim, Calvin did insist that conversion normally requires a preparatory work of the law. In Book 2, Chapter 5 of the *Institutes*, Calvin counters Pighius' objection that the doctrine of the bondage of the will removes the need for Scriptural exhortations, warnings and precepts by pointing Luther-like to the preparatory work of the law:

If exhortations and reproofs profit the godly nothing except to convince them of sin, these ought not for this reason to be accounted utterly useless. Now, who would dare since, with the Spirit acting within, they are perfectly able to kindle in us the desire for the good, to shake off sluggishness, to remove the lust for iniquity and its envenomed sweetness—on the contrary, to engender hatred and loathing toward it?<sup>37</sup>

In fact, knowledge of the law drives man to pray for the power to obey, and Scripture promises are added to precepts to motivate even more fervent seeking: “Because our sluggishness is not sufficiently aroused by precepts, promises are added in order... to entice us to love the precepts. The greater our desire for righteousness, the more fervent we become to seek God's grace.”<sup>38</sup>

The condemnation of the law, then, is designed to make the unconverted flee to God's mercy. God also uses the law to restrain them from

<sup>35</sup> *Institutes*, II.iii.11.

<sup>36</sup> *Bondage and Liberation*, 234–35.

<sup>37</sup> *Institutes*, II.v.5.

<sup>38</sup> *Institutes*, II.v.8.

committing conscience-searing sins prior to the “time of his visitation.”<sup>39</sup> Calvin reinforces his message by painting a vivid picture: “the law is to the flesh like a whip to an idle and balky ass, to arouse it to work . . . to [attain] the goal [of moral purity].”<sup>40</sup>

Far from entertaining “thunderbolt theology,”<sup>41</sup> Calvin notices God’s frequent utilization of an ordered sequence of steps (a morphology of conversion):

There is not the least reason for us to be afraid of coming where the Holy Spirit distinctly calls [us] to come. For this sequence and these steps of God’s mercy are described for us, so that he may glorify those whom he has justified, justify those whom he has called, and call those whom he has chosen.<sup>42</sup>

In the same vein, he observes that God “bestows his favors in stages, so that the one is a preparation for the other.”<sup>43</sup>

## Rejection of Preparation by Prominent Modern Reformed Theologians

Nevertheless, the Puritan doctrine of preparation for grace continues to be tragically misunderstood today, even by eminent modern Reformed divines. One example is Scottish church historian Thomas M’Crie, who objects to any preaching that “teaches that repentance and new obedience are necessary as prerequisite qualifications, in order to warrant our coming to the Saviour.”<sup>44</sup> M’Crie is right to object to Baxter’s erroneous insistence on the “priority of repentance to faith”<sup>45</sup> and to his teaching (summarized

<sup>39</sup> *Institutes*, II.v.11.

<sup>40</sup> *Institutes*, II.v.12.

<sup>41</sup> William K. B. Stoever remarks that “the doctrine of divine sovereignty as held by sixteenth- and seventeenth century Reformed divines, Continental and English, does not appear to have required an understanding of conversion as an instantaneous, lightening-bolt-on-the-road-to-Damascus sort of experience. This conception seems more reminiscent of a Cane Ridge meeting than of a Swiss or early Puritan congregation” (*A Faire and Easye Way to Heaven: Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* [Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1978], 219 n.16).

<sup>42</sup> *Bondage and Liberation*, 153.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas M’Crie, *The Story of the Scottish Church* (Glasgow: Bell and Bain, 1874), 453.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

by Packer) that, “repentance and faith, being obedient to this new law [of the gospel] are the believer’s saving righteousness,”<sup>46</sup> which makes “new obedience” an added condition of the sinner’s justification.

But M’Crie does not stop while he is ahead. He goes on to complain of a “legal” strain of preaching, exemplified by David Dickson (1583–1663) in his *Sum of Saving Knowledge* (a small book appended since 1650 to the Scottish version of the Westminster Confession) and contrasts the “very different ... evangelical strain of Hugh Binning, Samuel Rutherford and Archbishop Leighton. The two lines of antagonistic sentiments now came [in the Marrow Controversy] into open and violent collision.”<sup>47</sup>

M’Crie’s argument against preaching the need for repentance seems motivated by his fear that the unregenerate might take his repentance (or new obedience) to be a work meriting salvation. Yet none of the three divines cited by M’Crie appear on closer examination to share his objection to the preaching of repentance. Hugh Binning, the first cited authority, writes:

I know it is not possible that a lost soul can receive Christ till there be some preparatory convincing work of the law to discover sin and misery; but I hold to look for any such preparation and fetch an encouragement or motive therefrom to believe in Christ is really to give him a price for his free waters and wine. It is to mix in Christ and the law in the point of our acceptation. He must examine himself not to find himself a *sensible humble* sinner, that so he may have ground of believing, but that he find himself a *lost perishing* sinner, void of all grace and goodness, that he may find the more necessity of Christ.<sup>48</sup>

Note well that Binning qualifies his opinion by first acknowledging the absolute necessity of the preparatory work of the law. Binning’s concern seems to be not that preaching repentance should be avoided but that a “sensible” or “qualified” sinner might fail to realize his “lostness.”

Likewise, the second cited authority, Samuel Rutherford in *Trial and Triumph of Faith* (1645) insisted on the necessity of preparation for grace through conviction of sin. Rutherford declares:

Those at whose salvation Christ has a special aim, and whom he actually converts, are first sinners and lost in their own eyes. Hence Christ actually calls and saves but [only] those who are prepared. There is a prepara-

<sup>46</sup> Packer, *Quest*, 108.

<sup>47</sup> M’Crie, *ibid.*, 454.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

tion of order. God's ordinary way is to bring men to Christ [who first realize that they are] lost and condemned.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, Robert Leighton, the third authority relied on by M'Crie, expects "faith, and inseparable repentance and leaving off sin" for a seeker to come to Christ<sup>50</sup> and enforces the necessity of the preparatory work of the law:

The gospel is not a doctrine of licentiousness... but of new life in Christ, ...though in the notion of repentance, there is ... the law convincing of sin and death, and working a sense of misery and sorrow. [Yet] nothing is so powerful as the doctrine of free grace to convert a soul, not excluding convincements [convictions of sin] by the law, but including them.<sup>51</sup>

Owen, in common with other Puritans, never equates conviction of sin with conversion from sin. In fact, he depicts several ways in which conviction of sin could miscarry without reaching the point of conversion (see chapter 7). What is more, the usual Puritan sequence of conversion insists on self-despair. As J. I. Packer points out, "The themes of man's natural inability to believe, of God's free election being the ultimate cause of salvation, and of Christ's dying specifically for his sheep [are meant through preaching to] drive sinners to despair, by suggesting to them that it is not in their own power to be saved through Christ."<sup>52</sup> Owen, though of a different persuasion from M'Crie, still would have sympathized with his concern, observing that:

[Gospel] promises will sufficiently warrant a perplexed soul to close with Christ, even when it can find in itself no other qualifications or conditions, but only such as render it every way unworthy to be accepted. At [the] least, a man's sense and acknowledgement of his [lost] condition is needful to precede his closing with the promise.<sup>53</sup>

In other words, to answer Binning's expressed concern, it is not the qualified sinner but the lost one who feels his need to come to Christ.

<sup>49</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *The Trial and Triumph of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), 148–49. Rutherford also subscribed to the difficulty of salvation (*ibid.*, 285–86).

<sup>50</sup> Robert Leighton, "Lectures on the First Nine Chapters of Matthew" in *The Whole Works of Robert Leighton*, Vol. 3:16.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3:21–22.

<sup>52</sup> Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 126.

<sup>53</sup> Owen, *Works*, 9:48.

Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), a second example, repudiates the idea that preparatory grace can be a material cause of regeneration.<sup>54</sup> Wrestling a metaphor originally used by Owen and other Puritans<sup>55</sup> to explain the doctrine of preparation for grace (see Chapter 9), Kuyper interprets it so as to deny this doctrine altogether. In *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, he asserts:

Even the representation, still maintained by some of our best theologians, that preparatory grace is like the drying of wet wood, so that the spark can more readily ignite it, we cannot adopt. Wet wood will not take the spark. It *must* be dried before it *can* be kindled. And this does not apply to the work of grace. This disposition of our souls is immaterial.<sup>56</sup>

Kuyper provocatively maintains that, “Neither slothfulness nor neglect can ever hinder an elect person from passing from death to life at the appointed time.”<sup>57</sup> Owen begs to differ, unwilling to encourage any despite of God’s appointed means of grace: “It is brutish ignorance in any to argue in things of God, from the effectual operations of the Spirit, unto a sloth and negligence of our own duty. . . . God hath promised to ‘work in us’ in a way of grace what He requires from us in a way of duty.”<sup>58</sup>

Yet a third example of this misunderstanding surfaced in 1995 in a published debate between Robert Letham and Donald Macleod. Macleod takes the same road traveled earlier by M’Crie:

Long before it became fashionable to denigrate the scholasticism of 17th Century Calvinism, voices within Evangelicalism itself were commenting on the marked differences between the Christianity represented by David Dickson’s *Sum of Saving Knowledge* and that represented by the sermons of Samuel Rutherford.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup> He and Owen would both agree that preparation can never serve as a formal or efficient cause of regeneration. Aristotle posited four types of causes: (1) An efficient cause is that by which some change is wrought; (2) A final cause is the end or purpose for which the change is produced; (3) A material cause is that out of which a change is wrought; and (4) A formal cause is that into which something is changed (Richard Taylor, “Causation,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards [New York: Macmillan, 1967], 2:56).

<sup>55</sup> See for example, Iain H. Murray, “Antinomianism: New England’s First Controversy,” *Banner of Truth* 179–180 (August 1978): 45, quoting similar metaphors for preparation from David Dickson and John Cotton (1584–1652).

<sup>56</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1900), 307 (emphasis his).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>58</sup> Owen, *Works*, 3:204.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Letham and Donald Macleod, “Is Evangelicalism Christian?” *Evangelical Quarterly* 67 (1995): 17.



Like M'Crie before him, Macleod criticizes Dickson as a "legal" preacher and mistakes Rutherford to be an opponent of preparation for grace. Macleod claims that in Dickson's work "disproportionate attention is given to the processes by which men are convicted of sin, righteousness and judgment"<sup>60</sup> and, somewhat surprisingly, goes far beyond M'Crie in approving the wording of the Auchterarder Creed that had sparked the Marrow Controversy.<sup>61</sup> M'Crie had conceded that, "The proposition was unhappily worded; for the duty of every sinner must, no doubt, be to forsake sin."<sup>62</sup>

In Kuyper's case, his opposition to preparation for grace is most readily explained by hyper-Calvinism. The most obvious exhibition of this strain in his theology, besides his failure to discourage slothfulness, is his view that covenant children (i.e., those with Christian parentage who have undergone infant baptism and remained under the means of grace) are presumptively regenerate. As for M'Crie and Macleod, their opposition stems primarily from their "Marrow" theology, a theology that arose in early Eighteenth-Century Scotland when Thomas Boston (1677–1732) rediscovered *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), a book whose theological tenets bear several striking affinities with those of Seventeenth-Century English antinomian theology.

First, both Marrowmen and Seventeenth-Century English antinomians object to the conditionality of the covenant of grace, as when the Westminster Larger Catechism question and answer 153 insists that both faith and repentance are conditions of salvation and Westminster Confession section 15.1 declares that, "repentance unto life is an evangelical grace,

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 18. Macleod's criticism of Dickson of a "legal" preacher seems somewhat unfair. Dickson acknowledges that faith and repentance are gifts from God. (The Westminster Confession of Faith, 325.) Dickson's treatment suggests matter of conviction of sin, righteousness and judgment from not only the law but also the gospel (Ibid., 326–330). He also insisted that, "The true end of the law, preached unto the people, is that they, by the law being made to see their deserved condemnation, should flee to Christ unfeignedly, to be justified by faith in Christ (Ibid., 341). Though he does provide a model sinner's prayer, Dickson insists only that God "may" answer it (Ibid., 330).

<sup>61</sup> The Auchterarder Creed provided, "I believe it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we must forsake sin in order to our coming with Christ, and instating us in covenant with God" (cited in McCrie, 452). Formulated by the Auchterarder Presbytery, this creed contradicts Proverbs 28:13 which declares that "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes his sins will have mercy." It was probably a well-intentioned, but not well-executed, attempt to correct Richard Baxter's error of placing repentance before faith in the order of salvation.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.



the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ" and section 15.3, that "repentance is of such necessity to sinners, that none may expect pardon without it." In a fairly recent article on Thomas Boston, A. T. B. McGowan shockingly suggested that the Church of Scotland churchmen who condemned the Marrowmen "were guilty of a perversion of covenant theology. They made repentance a condition of salvation."<sup>63</sup>

Most importantly, as discussed at length in Chapter 4, John Owen's theology cuts the ground out from anyone like McGowan who objects to the conditionality of the covenant of grace: Owen demonstrates that because the bond of grace and duty is indissoluble, any perceived contradiction between absolute and conditional promises in the covenant of grace is only apparent and not real. In his treatise *Justification* (1678), Owen reconciled these two types of gospel promises:

That those who were to be taken into this covenant [of grace] should receive grace enabling them to comply with the terms of it, fulfills its conditions, [and] yield the obedience which God required therein; for, by the ordination of God, [Jesus Christ] did merit and procure for them, the Holy Spirit and all needful supplies of grace, to make them new creatures, and enable them to yield obedience from a new principle of spiritual life faithfully to the end.<sup>64</sup>

Secondly, both groups at large object to preaching the law as preparation for grace. Thirdly, neither group accepts fear of hell, or hope of heaven and reward as legitimate gospel motives. Fourthly, both groups tend to downplay obedience because of their shared view that it flows almost automatically from regeneration.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> A. T. B. McGowan, "Thomas Boston," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 109.

<sup>64</sup> Owen, *Works*, 5:188. Owen also affirms later in this same treatise that "all the good things... promised in the covenant [of grace] were all procured for us by the obedience and death of Christ" (*Works*, 5:194). See also Bunyan's statement in *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ*: "There is a blessed harmony between [absolute and conditional promises]. The conditional promise calls for repentance, the absolute promise gives it (Acts 5:31). The conditional promise calls for faith, the absolute promise gives it (Zeph. 3:12; Rom. 15:12). The conditional promise calls for a new heart, the absolute promise gives it (Ezek. 36:25–26). The conditional promise calls for holy obedience, the absolute promise gives it, or causes it (Ezek. 36:27)" (*Works*, 1:255).

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Boston seems to be a notable exception to this generalization, at least as applied to preparation for glory. See A. W. Pink, *Exposition of the Ser-*

Though understandably sympathetic to the Marrowmen as the evangelical party in the Church of Scotland during the controversy, W. G. Blaikie, professor of theology at New College, Edinburgh for almost 30 years, powerfully captures semi-antinomian tendencies of their theological tenets and is worth quoting in full:

The [General] Assembly laid stress on the obligation of obedience to the moral law, as revealed under the covenant of works, and to the fear of punishment and hope of reward as still being considerations that ought to influence believers in their life; while the [Marrowmen] held the believer to be free from the obligation of the law as a covenant and maintained that, under the new covenant of grace, gratitude, filial love and delight in God were the [only] true motives to obedience. But the [real] drift [of the Marrow school] was to maintain and magnify the glorious grace of God, and sometimes, through fear of an undue place being given to personal obedience, to speak of it somewhat disparagingly. Not that the evangelical school failed to maintain the necessity of obedience; not that they failed to urge that a faith not followed by works was no living faith but only a dead pretender; but somehow they failed to expend their strength on this department of truth; they regarded [Christian obedience] as something that in a large degree might take care of itself: if they were successful in procuring the right kind of faith, good works would certainly follow. But to preach good works before faith [i.e., the preparatory work of the law] was to try to reap a harvest where no right seed had been sown.<sup>66</sup>

Professor Blaikie observes, then, four striking resemblances between Marrow theology and Seventeenth-Century antinomianism, namely shared objections to (1) treating repentance as a condition of justification; (2) preaching the law as preparation for grace; (3) embracing fear of eternal punishments or hopes of heavenly reward as motives for obedience; and (4) emphasizing the importance of obedience.

A fourth prominent example is furnished by the theology of Norman Shepherd, who resurrects Richard Baxter's neonomianism by claiming the conditions of justification are not only faith and repentance but "new obedience" too.<sup>67</sup> In rejecting traditional "regeneration-evangelism", Shepherd

*mon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Baker Book House, 1982 repr.) 353 quoting Boston's *View of the Covenant of Grace*: "[God] gives the rewards of the covenant in the course of their obedience."

<sup>66</sup> W. G. Blaikie, *The Preachers of Scotland* (Glasgow: T. & T. Clark, 1888), 193–94.

<sup>67</sup> Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2000), 98.

jettisons the preparatory use of the law and even preaching for conversion. Given that “the climax of the gospel appeal is reached when the hearer is urged to ask God for a new heart with which to lay hold of the grace of Christ,”<sup>68</sup> Shepherd objects to a supposed inconsistency between natural inability and any sort of preparation for grace:<sup>69</sup>

The serious tension between the demand for faith and repentance and denial of any ability to do what is demanded... is all too familiar to any Reformed [evangelist]. Even the exhortation to ask for a new heart does not square with the doctrine of total inability. There is *nothing* the unregenerate person can do or will to do to move toward conversion.<sup>70</sup>

Shepherd's counsel of human inactivity is very similar to that of Abraham Kuiper.

### Vast Importance of Preparation For Grace in Puritan Evangelism

In marked contrast to its prevalent neglect in modern Reformed theology, the doctrine of preparation loomed large in Puritan theology and evangelism. Edwards' grandfather Solomon Stoddard (1639–1729) wrote the standard guide to evangelism for New England pastors entitled *A Guide to Christ* (1714). In his foreword, Increase Mather (1639–1723), another leading Puritan pastor in New England, signals the urgency of preparation for grace.

That preparation for grace is necessary before the soul can be united by Him to faith is an undoubted truth. *He came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.* Men must be convinced of their being sinners or they will not be in bitterness for it. Sin must be bitter to them or they will not forsake it. As long as they love their sins, it is impossible that they should believe on Christ (John 5:44), nor will they come to Christ for righteousness and life unless they have a humbling sense of their own unrighteousness (Romans 10:3).<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>69</sup> Guy Prentiss Waters, in criticizing Shepherd's view of justification, aptly cites the Westminster Larger Catechism question and answer 32 which declares “holy obedience” to be “the way... appointed... to salvation” but not the way to justification. *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004], 210.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 98 (emphasis his).

<sup>71</sup> Solomon Stoddard, *A Guide to Christ* (Ligonier, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993 reprint), ix.

Stoddard likewise insists on the necessity of a ‘work of preparation.’ He even predicts that catastrophic consequences for the church would ensue from neglect of this doctrine.

There are some who deny any necessity of the preparatory work of the Spirit of God in order to a closing with Christ. This is a very dark cloud, both as it is an evidence that men do not have the experience of this work in their own souls, and as it is a sign that such men are utterly unskillful in guiding others who are under this work. If this opinion should prevail in the land, it would give a deadly wound to religion. It would expose men to think of themselves as converted when they are not.<sup>72</sup>

Nor were these New England Puritan pastors unrepresentative of English Puritans. Scholars have discovered a prominent doctrine of preparation for grace in the sermons of Richard Greenham (1540–1594),<sup>73</sup> Thomas Hooker (1586–1647)<sup>74</sup> and Richard Sibbes (1577–1635).<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, mainstream Puritan pastors even gave directions toward ‘getting’ faith and repentance (as the instrumental means of conversion). Thomas Watson (ca.1620–1686) prescribes six means of repentance. These include (1) a serious consideration of sin, God’s mercies, affliction and final judgment; (2) comparison of conditions now and later for the penitent as opposed to the impenitent; (3) a settled determination to forsake sin; (4) earnest supplication for the gift of repentance; (5) a comparison of God’s holiness with one’s own sinfulness; and (6) labor for faith.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, John Flavel (ca.1630–1691) gives out ten directions toward receiving faith. Among these are counting the cost, engaging in petitionary prayer, parting with any “darling” sin and making covenant to accept Christ as Prophet, Priest and King.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>73</sup> John H. Primus, *Richard Greenham: The Portrait of an Elizabethan Pastor* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1998), see especially chapter 6, “The Doctrine of Means.”

<sup>74</sup> Sargent H. Bush, Jr., *The Writings of Thomas Hooker: Spiritual Adventure in Two Worlds* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980). Though Hooker immigrated to New England, he began his pastoral ministry in England.

<sup>75</sup> Mark E. Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2000).

<sup>76</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987 reprint), 106–22.

<sup>77</sup> John Flavel, *Works of John Flavel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 4:137–42.

## The Puritan View of Conversion and Preparation for Grace and Glory

The doctrine of conversion occupied a central place in Puritan piety. As Packer observes, "The elaborate practical 'handling' of the subject of conversion in Puritan books was regarded by the rest of the seventeenth-century Protestant world as something of unique value."<sup>78</sup> Pride of place for modern study of the Puritan view of conversion goes to Perry Miller, the Harvard professor who revived academic interest in Puritan theology. Miller popularized involuntary conversion as "the rape of the surprised will."<sup>79</sup> In *The New England Mind* he writes: "Supernatural grace, a work peculiar to the elect, comes upon them with irresistible force and depends upon no antecedent conditions and preparations. This conception is the very heart of Puritanism. This [force] is free, unpredictable and lawless."<sup>80</sup>

Miller's view of Puritan conversion, though criticized by Norman Pettit (see chapter 3) has been widely influential, which is unfortunate for several reasons. The Puritans never limited the subject of conversion to the will, as Miller does, because all human faculties are renewed in regeneration. Nor did the Puritans view the will as unwilling in conversion. In fact, the Westminster Confession declares that those whom God has effectually called "out of a state of sin and death... come most freely, being made willing by his grace."<sup>81</sup> Miller even contradicted himself by admitting that the Puritans did not view conversion as involuntary and voluntaristic. In a chapter "The Means of Conversion", Miller in full-scale retreat mode admits that the Puritans understood regeneration to be voluntary and to involve the mind and not just the will:

In regeneration God deals with men as rational creatures, converts them by an influence of grace and yet also by a rational enlightenment. The will is not forced, but led. We come to faith voluntarily. Because grace does not destroy but rectifies nature, conversion must come through the reason.

Though grace is a cataclysm, a sudden revelation, a burst of light, though it is above [nature], it is not entirely unrelated to efficient causes. A naturalistic account can be given of the supernatural, even though in many

<sup>78</sup> J I Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 292, quoting the contemporary observations of Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680) and Philip Nye (ca.1596–1672) to this effect.

<sup>79</sup> Miller, "Preparation for Salvation," 261.

<sup>80</sup> Perry Miller, *The New England Mind* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 34.

<sup>81</sup> Westminster Confession section 10.1. See Psalm 110:3.

instances the same natural causes produce no regeneration. There is a logic and a preparation, a conception and a gestation. In orthodox Puritan theory, grace is not thrust upon the soul unexpectedly and abruptly, but is insinuated according to the laws of psychology through means.<sup>82</sup>

In fact, the Puritans did not view conversion as a merely one-time event, but as an ongoing course of sanctification involving repetition of the same basic pattern of conversion. Charles Hambrick-Stowe notices that:

Scholars have commonly limited their discussion of Puritan religious life to the issue of conversion. New Englanders, admittedly, made much of this experience as a personal milestone and credential, but it marked only the beginning of the journey. The spiritual dynamics of preparation and implantation [union with Christ]—death and resurrection, repentance for sin and subsequent salvation—described the actual experience of individuals over the course of their lives.<sup>83</sup>

In other words, preparation for grace (though monergistic) and preparation for glory (though synergistic) both nevertheless follow the same prescribed steps such as conviction, faith, and repentance. Hambrick-Stowe, citing William Perkins (1558–1602) and Thomas Shepard (1605–1649),<sup>84</sup> states that “Shepard referred to his own progress in grace with a startling phrase ‘renewed conversions.’ The stages of these deeper experiences followed the original conversion pattern.”<sup>85</sup>

As appears in chapters 2 and 3, many antinomians such as John Everarde and Anne Hutchinson (1615–1643) decried the doctrine of preparation as a supposed infringement on free grace. But both Owen and Edwards, probably the two greatest Puritan theologians, believed that preparation for grace was sound and important for powerful evangelistic preaching. Edwards highlights the importance of preaching with a morphology of conversion kept firmly in mind:

Many persons seem to be prejudiced against affections and experiences, that come in such a method as has been insisted on by many divines: first, awakenings, fears and awful apprehensions, followed with such legal humblings in a sense of total sinfulness and helplessness, and [only] then light and comfort.... But such prejudices and objections are without rea-

<sup>82</sup> Miller, *The New England Mind*, 288–89.

<sup>83</sup> Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 21.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 78. Perkins, as quoted by Hambrick-Stowe, acknowledges the monergism-synergism distinction between the two.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

son or Scripture.... It is God's manner of dealing with men to lead them into a wilderness, before he speaks comfortably to them and so to order it, that they shall be brought into distress, and made to see their own helplessness and absolute dependence on his power and grace, before he appears to work any great deliverance for them is abundantly manifest by the Scripture.<sup>86</sup>

Owen and Edwards did believe, nevertheless, that some Puritan divines had prescribed too much detail and uniformity in their published morphologies of conversion. Edwards writes that, "Some have gone too far toward directing the Spirit of the Lord, and marking out His footsteps for Him, and limiting Him to certain steps and methods."<sup>87</sup> In *The Real Christian* (1670) Puritan pastor Giles Firmin (1615–1697), who had resided in England and New England, identifies Thomas Hooker and Thomas Shepard.

Surprisingly, however, Owen does not figure among Puritans whose view of preparation has been studied in-depth. Why should Owen's views of preparation for grace and glory repay study? First, he is widely considered the "prince of the Puritan divines," both doctrinally and experientially. As Ferguson remarks, "There is widespread agreement that John Owen was *the* theologian of the Puritan movement."<sup>88</sup> His stature as a theologian may be grasped by the nearly unprecedented public response to Gould's release of his 24-volume collected works in 1853 when nearly 300 libraries ordered the full set.<sup>89</sup> Owen regularly preached to a congregation numbering nearly 2,000 and frequently to Parliament. Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University from 1652–1657, Owen even with a Doctorate of Divinity awarded by Oxford in 1653, remained self-effacing enough to attend the preaching of John Bunyan (1628–1688). Seeking Bunyan's release from prison, Owen's self-deprecating remark to King Charles II about his own preaching should not be taken at face value. Owen's preaching combined theological incisiveness with searching application. In 1839 under the preaching of young William Chalmers Burns revival broke out in Dundee and Kilsyth, Scotland, ultimately leading to the founding of the Free Church of Scotland. Burns' preaching drew mainly from Owen's *Exposition of Psalm 130* (1688)<sup>90</sup> about personal appropriation of God's forgiveness.

<sup>86</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 2:151–52.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>88</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 19 (emphasis his).

<sup>89</sup> *Works*, 1:xii.

<sup>90</sup> Michael McMullen, *God's Polished Arrow: William Chalmers Burns* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 32.



Owen wrote a large number of treatises relevant to preparation for grace and glory. *Pneumatologia* (1674) is a systematic theology expounding the person and work of the Holy Spirit and spelling out the bond of grace and duty in the Christian life. *On the Mortification of Sin* (1656) lays out a Scriptural approach to putting to death the principle of indwelling sin. *Of Temptation* (1658) counsels strategies of avoidance and conquest. *On Indwelling Sin in Believers* (1668) equips the Christian to withstand the formidable power of indwelling sin. *The Nature and Causes of Apostasy* (1676) surveys total and partial apostasy in church history and Christian living. *On Spiritual-Mindedness* (1681) demonstrates that the transforming reality of regeneration can be known primarily by the spiritual transformation of the mind. *On the Dominion of Sin and Grace* (1688) gives directions toward securing the throne of grace in the believer's heart against the usurpation of sin. His massive seven-volume *Exposition of Hebrews* (1668–1684) sets out the importance of sounding gospel warnings, even to Christians.

Secondly, often called the English Calvin and known for exhaustive treatment of every subject tackled, Owen's thorough views on preparation for grace and glory should set the benchmark for mainstream Puritan theology while demonstrating the basic continuity between Puritan and Reformed theology. As Packer observes,

By common consent the greatest among Puritan theologians, no one can touch him for solidity, profundity, massiveness and majesty in exhibiting from Scripture God's ways with sinful mankind. He stands in the centre of the Puritan mainstream.... In his own day he was seen as England's foremost bastion and champion of Reformed evangelical orthodoxy. For method and substance [of his theology] Owen reminds one frequently of Calvin; he is constantly near the centre of seventeenth-century Reformed thought throughout.<sup>91</sup>

Thirdly, though Owen wrote in far less detail on preparation for grace and the morphology of conversion than Hooker or Shepard, he wrote correspondingly more on preparation for glory. A study of Owen should give a greater sense of the symmetry between preparation for grace and preparation for glory in the overall scheme of the Christian life. Though Owen acknowledged with Perkins that the former is monergistic and the latter synergistic, he still regarded the Christian life as the ongoing repetition of the basic pattern of conversion.

Fourthly, Owen himself, in discussing mortification of sin in *On the Dominion of Sin and Grace* (1688), clearly differentiates between preparation for grace and preparation for glory.

<sup>91</sup> Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 81, 193 (conflated and paraphrased slightly).



It is true, in our first conversion to God, we are as it were surprised by a mighty act of sovereign grace, changing our hearts, renewing our minds, and quickening us with a principle of spiritual life. Ordinarily, many things are required of us in a way of duty in order thereunto; and many previous operations of grace in our minds, in illumination and the sense of sin, do materially and passively dispose us thereunto, as wood when it is dried is disposed to firing; but the work itself is performed by an immediate act of divine power, without any active cooperation on our part. But this is not the law or rule of the communication or operation of actual grace for the subduing of sin. It is given in a way of concurrence with us in the discharge of our duties; and when we are sedulous in them, we may be sure that we shall not fail of divine assistance, according to the established rule of the administration of gospel grace.<sup>92</sup>

Note that preparation for grace does not involve “any active cooperation on our part.” By contrast, as Owen puts it, God hath promised to ‘work in us’ in a way of grace what He requires from us in a way of duty.

Fifthly, and most importantly, as fully discussed in Chapter 4, John Owen and John Bunyan will not only make a very important theological distinction between absolute and conditional promises of the covenant of grace. Owen and Bunyan will demonstrate how the absolute promise secures the full covenantal performance of the conditional promise, thereby removing the ground out from under any who would object to the conditionality of the covenant of grace.

Recovering the doctrine of preparation for grace and glory should make a dramatic difference in the effectiveness of evangelism and the pursuit of holiness. The doctrine of preparation for grace greatly influences the way the gospel is preached. Does a preparatory work of the law, for example, normally precede conversion? Stoddard believes that neglect of the doctrine of preparation produces false conversions and gives religion a “deadly wound.” Owen likewise affirms that it is “a duty incumbent on all ministers of the gospel to acquaint themselves with the normal morphology of conversion that they may be able to comply with the will of God and grace of the Spirit in the effecting and accomplishment of it [conversion] upon the souls of them unto whom they dispense the word.”<sup>93</sup> Owen

<sup>92</sup> *Works*, 7:549. On the doctrine of divine concurrence, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 171–75.

<sup>93</sup> *Works*, 3:227. A morphology of conversion describes the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing a sinner to a place of repentance and faith in Christ and the steps normally involved in the process. See Samuel T. Logan, “Jonathan Edwards and the Northampton Awakening,” in *Preaching and Revival* (London: Westminster Conference, 1984), 69.

even attributes pastoral ignorance of the morphology of conversion and the “want [lack] of an experience of the power of this work in their own souls” as “one great cause of that lifeless and unprofitable ministry” among Reformed pastors.<sup>94</sup>

The doctrine of preparation for glory is no less crucial. Owen, by tracing out bond of grace and duty throughout the whole spectrum of the Christian life, has given the church the spiritual weapon to identify and escape from the cheap-grace theology that enervates the power of its holiness and witness to the watching world.

## Methodology

Earlier Owen scholars generally recognized that Owen’s theological output targeted clearly identified opponents: Arminians, Socinians, Roman Catholics, Anglican moralists, and Quakers. His first published theological work, *A Display of Arminianism* (1642), attacked the resurgent Arminianism of Laudian Anglicanism; and both *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647) and *The Doctrine of Perseverance* (1674) challenged the Arminian denial of particular redemption and perseverance. His sustained attack on Socinianism [Unitarianism] appeared in *Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1669) and *Vindiciae Evangelicae, or the Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated* (1655). Volume 14 of his Works collects a number of his treatises written against Roman Catholic theology and practice. *Pneumatologia* (1674) insisted on the reality of regeneration over against Anglican moralists; and his *Pro Sacris Scripturis Exercitationes adversus Fanaticos* (1659) rebutted the main tenets of Quakerism.

Yet this study will argue that Owen wrote against a more subtle and pernicious theological opponent that has yet to become a central focus of Owen scholarship, namely, Seventeenth-Century antinomians. This battleground has remained largely out of sight for two reasons. First, while earlier Owen scholars recognized the presence of named theological opponents and mentioned the antinomian threat occasionally, studies by David Como<sup>95</sup> and Theodore Bozeman<sup>96</sup> documenting the vitality and growth of the antinomian underground in both England and New England even in

<sup>94</sup> *Works*, 3:227–28.

<sup>95</sup> David R. Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>96</sup> Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

early decades of the 1600's did not appear in print until 2004. Secondly, for undisclosed reasons, Owen took a stealth tack in opposing his antinomian adversaries. While he often named or even quoted his recognized theological opponents, Owen never quoted antinomians directly, much less mentioned them by name.<sup>97</sup> Although it was a convention of Seventeenth-Century authors not to quote their contemporaries when more ancient authorities would serve,<sup>98</sup> this convention does fully explain his mysterious reticence.

To demonstrate that Seventeenth-Century antinomians served as one of Owen's more prominent theological opponents, three strands of evidence will be marshaled. The first body of evidence comes from Owen's treatises and prefaces wherein he bemoans the prevailing apostasy of his era and its doctrinal and practical antinomianism. For example, *The Glory of Christ Applied to Unconverted Sinners and Saints under Spiritual Decays* (1692), as its title implies, addresses a time of "public apostasy" involving the "notorious" neglect of public worship and private devotion.<sup>99</sup> It was antinomian preachers and their doctrinal antinomianism that were blamed by Owen for this sorry state of affairs. He lambasts their hypocritical coupling of moral laxity with claims to Christian perfection, "Cursed be the man who encourages you to come to Christ with hopes of indulgence for even one sin. I do not speak this as though you could at once absolutely and perfectly leave all sin, in the roots and branches of it."<sup>100</sup> Any lingering doubt that Owen is addressing perfectionist antinomians (see chapter 2) should vanish as he by all accounts seems to make a direct allusion to Rutherford's statement made only a few years earlier: "Antinomians will have the justified to be so quiet in spirit, as if Christ had removed sin root and branch."<sup>101</sup>

The treatise *On Indwelling Sin* (1658) reveals Owen's awareness of practical antinomianism too. In explaining how indwelling sin undermines Christian obedience, Owen points out that the antinomian ruse of excusing sin works "by a horrible abuse of gospel grace."<sup>102</sup> "The deceit of sin

<sup>97</sup> He does mention "antinomianism" by name twice in *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (*Works*, 5:73, 145).

<sup>98</sup> Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 22.

<sup>99</sup> *Works*, 1:455.

<sup>100</sup> *Works*, 1:431.

<sup>101</sup> Rutherford, *The Trial and Triumph of Faith*, 245. Owen's writings show him to be fully aware of Rutherford, especially on the disputed issue of satisfaction, though Owen otherwise admired him. For background on the dispute, see Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 28.

<sup>102</sup> *Works*, 6:218.

interposes itself. It separates between the doctrine of grace and its [proper] use. From the doctrine of the assured pardon of sin, it insinuates a regardlessness [heedlessness] of sin."<sup>103</sup> Citing Romans 6:4 ("ungodly men turning the grace of God into lasciviousness"), Owen had witnessed "dreadful" moral lapses.<sup>104</sup>

The second type of evidence, and probably the most conclusive, is Owen's own identification in his preface to *Pneumatologia* of "enthusiasts" (in addition to Socinians and Anglican moralists) as major theological opponents. His Nineteenth-Century biographer Andrew Thomson noticed Owen's crucial identification of enthusiasts.<sup>105</sup> Owen was responding to the charge, most likely made by Anglican moralists, that "by the operations we ascribe to the Holy Spirit, we expose men to be deceived by *satanical delusions*, and open a door to enthusiasms, directing them to the guidance of unaccountable impulses and revelations."<sup>106</sup> They accused Owen of illuminism, irrationalism and immediatism, which are presuppositions usually associated with antinomian authors, as chapter 2 will demonstrate.

In self-defense Owen left no doubt that *Pneumatologica* targeted antinomian errors. First, he attacks "foul enthusiasm" taking the form of receiving supposedly divine guidance from "impulses."

Foul enthusiasm ha[s] pretended to proceed from the Spirit of God and to have a divine original [origin]. So far [am I] from affirming any operation of the Holy Spirit to consist in enthusiasms of any kind, I do not pretend to regard the two as consistent. By impulses, some men do not mean the promised supplies of grace we are supposed to pray for but irrational impressions or violent inclinations toward duties [nowhere described in Scripture].<sup>107</sup>

Exactly what is this "foul enthusiasm"? Packer identified the essence of "enthusiasm" as a "different doctrine of the Spirit's work."<sup>108</sup> He continues,

The *enthusiasts* held, that over and above what [God] may do through the means [of grace], the Spirit works in the saints immediately, going beyond Scripture both in revelation of truth and in direct impulses to action. Man's duty, therefore, was to forego religious routine and to wait

<sup>103</sup> *Works*, 6:219.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Works*, 1:xciv.

<sup>106</sup> *Works*, 3:12–13.

<sup>107</sup> *Works*, 3:13.

<sup>108</sup> J. I. Packer, *The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent University Press, 2003 reprint), 324.

passively before God until the Spirit spoke. He must not tie himself to the means, for the Spirit was now working above and without means.<sup>109</sup>

Packer found that both Seventeenth-Century antinomians and Quakers had come under the spell of enthusiasm and mentions that the former “owed some of their own peculiarities to the influence of *enthusiastic* thought.”<sup>110</sup>

After rejecting “enthusiastic” guidance because false to the *modus operandi* of the Holy Spirit, Owen blasts “enthusiastic” claims to direct and new revelation. He wrote,

The same [claim of enmity to the true operations of the Holy Spirit] may be said concerning revelations. They are of two sorts: objective and subjective. Those of the former sort, whether they contain doctrines contrary to that of the Scripture, or additional thereto, or seeming confirmatory thereof, they are all universally to be rejected, the former being absolutely false, the latter useless. Neither have the operations of the Spirit pleaded for the least respect to them; for he having finished the whole work of external revelation, and closed it in the Scripture, his whole internal work [of spiritual illumination whereby we are able to discern and understand the mind of God in Scripture] is suited and commensurate to [the closed canon of Scripture].<sup>111</sup>

Owen argues that new revelation either confirmed or falsified Scripture. In the former case, it was useless; in the latter, dangerous.

The third type of evidence will consist of a reasoned attempt, using relevant primary and secondary sources, to identify Seventeenth-Century antinomians as Owen's theological opponents in many relevant contexts despite his restraint in “naming names.” Both convergence and divergence among Owen's theological opponents will be seen. Sometimes Owen simultaneously answered convergent theological opponents or, at other times, singled out antinomian adversaries for special rebuke. Where convergence exists, Owen's theological arguments are often of a “one-size-fits-all” variety. For example, as he mentioned in the preface to *Pneumatologia*, Socinians rejected the person of the Holy Spirit, Anglican moralists denied His work, and the enthusiasts falsified His work. Thus Owen's predications regarding the true *modus operandi* of the Holy Spirit in the application of redemption will sometimes correct multiple opponents simultaneously.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. (emphasis his).

<sup>110</sup> Packer, *Redemption and Restoration*, 325 (emphasis his).

<sup>111</sup> *Works*, 3:13.

On the other hand, two key areas of divergence between Socinians and Anglican moralists, on the one hand, and antinomians, on the other, should not escape notice. First, Socinians and Anglican moralists elevate the role of reason and reduce Scriptural truths to the rule of reason, whereas antinomians downplay the importance of reason and adopt irrationalism as their approach to divine guidance. Secondly, although Owen thought that Socinians and Anglican moralists built morality on the wrong foundation by dispensing with the necessity of regeneration, both remained moralists at heart. Not so the antinomians. They were constantly seeking to sever the bond of grace and duty and to eliminate the significance of the moral law. Confirmation of the thesis that Owen is frequently targeting antinomian opponents is suggested by the fact that Owen's *Pneumatologia*, expressly directed against "enthusiasts," is quoted with great relevance no fewer than 16 times in a crucial chapter of this study, namely Chapter 4, "The Bond of Grace and Duty."

## Conclusion

The Puritan doctrine of seeking is the view that man must generally undertake certain steps, in the diligent use of God's appointed means of grace, to prepare for grace and for glory. Though this Puritan doctrine built on a foundation laid by Luther and Calvin, it has fallen from favor in modern Reformed theology as the victim of widespread misunderstanding. While modern Arminian soteriology, with its revivalist emphasis on instantaneous conversion, has no place for a doctrine of preparation, defenders of Reformed orthodoxy are ironically inclined to characterize the doctrine of preparation as crypto-Arminianism. This misunderstanding stems from failure to recognize that God in His providence normally makes use of natural means, though supernaturally charged, in the conversion of the elect.

The doctrine of conversion was a central theme in Puritan theology and accordingly has been a dominant preoccupation in modern Puritan scholarship. Miller's influential involuntary and voluntaristic understanding of the Puritan model of conversion was misbegotten. The Puritans, by contrast, viewed conversion as requiring voluntary consent and involving grace perfecting nature. In addition, they viewed the pattern of conversion as something repeated throughout the entire Christian pilgrimage.

The Puritan doctrine of preparation, which acknowledges the necessity and priority of God's grace in the entire salvation process, is not related to meritorious medieval nominalism. The Puritans, like Luther and Calvin and unlike the nominalists, emphasized that preparation for grace in no way indebted God to give further supplies of grace to the sinner, even

though God normally rewards those who seek Him through the appointed means of grace (Hebrews 11:6). In fact, preparation for grace is actually designed to bring the sinner to a place of "salutary self-despair"<sup>112</sup> whereby he, recognizing his own powerlessness and unworthiness, is drawn to Christ.

Calvin and mainstream Puritans see the great importance to the church of the doctrine of preparation for grace and glory. Though rejecting the meritorious preparationism of Ockham and Biel and asserting the passivity of the human will in conversion, Calvin embraced the doctrine of preparation for grace. Even the unregenerate, drawn by grace and impelled by self-examination, should seek God as an all-consuming passion, particularly since God's usual method of grace is to reward the full use of grace with further grace. Just as biblical exhortations and reproofs convince of sin, so biblical promises and precepts motivate a more fervent seeking of God's grace. The preparatory work of the law is not only an essential prelude to conversion, but part of an even larger process whereby the Holy Spirit leads one through a "sequence of steps" to effectual calling, justification, and ultimately glorification.

In upholding the doctrine of preparation, Owen forged an indissoluble bond between Christian duty and grace. In direct opposition to Kuyper, Owen demonstrates that effectual grace should encourage diligence, not sloth, because "God has promised to work in us in a way of grace what He requires from us in a way of duty."<sup>113</sup> This linkage between grace and duty would seem to explain why Puritan pastors like Watson, Flavel, Owen and Baxter felt comfortable in giving "directions" for conversion, though never attaching any efficacy to the directions *per se*. Owen's indissoluble bond between grace and duty and reconciliation of absolute and conditional promises in the covenant of grace, such that the absolute promises guarantee the covenantal fulfillment of the conditional ones, obviates the objections of theologians who mistake making repentance a condition of conversion for legalism.

The doctrine of preparation for grace played an indispensable and pivotal role in Puritan evangelism. Leading Puritan pastors, such as Stoddard, Mather and even Owen himself, predicted disaster would befall the Christian church if this teaching ever fell into abeyance, as it indeed has done. Neglect of this doctrine casts serious doubt on whether pastors understand the depths of their own Christian conversion well enough to lead others to Christ and would also lead people to consider themselves converted when

<sup>112</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.3.

<sup>113</sup> *Works*, 3:204.

they were not. The Puritan doctrine of preparation for glory can also play a vital role in Christian spiritual growth and maturity. The bond of grace and duty properly understood reinforces Paul's injunction to work out one's salvation "with fear and trembling."