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1994

'BUT WE PREACH CHRIST  
CRUCIFIED'

THE CROSS OF CHRIST IN  
THE PASTORAL THEOLOGY OF  
JOHN OWEN 1616 - 1683

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## 1. Introduction: a message for all times



*Photograph: Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery*

They were the best of times and the worst of times, to coin a phrase. The shockwaves of an earth-shaking message were spreading out from the middle eastern epicentre. Through the Empire, ambassadors travelled with news of a great promise. Liberation and peace were available to all people, regardless of race, social status, sex or cultural background. A new age was dawning for a dark culture. Things were happening. These were exciting days.

They were demanding days too. Into the city of Corinth, one special herald arrived. Yet not without some problems. During the previous months of far-flung travel he had been welcomed by different peoples. Others, however, attacked him. On several occasions, in hasty, almost cloak and dagger

style, he had been forced to flee from various cities for his life. Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and Athens - after the events in these cities, Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, herald of an earth-shaking message, trembled himself. When he arrived in the city of Corinth it was not personally the easiest of times. He later wrote about his arrival, explaining to his Corinthian friends, 'I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling' (*1 Corinthians 2:3, NIV*). Given the character of Corinth at that time, it is not surprising.

Corinth was a religious, economic, social and moral hodge-podge. As Gordon Fee writes, all the evidence 'suggests that Paul's Corinth was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world.'<sup>1</sup> Understandably, Paul came to Corinth with some shaking. Yet he was certain of a crucial truth: the message of the cross of Jesus Christ. A person could feel intimidated by the cultural weight of Corinth, but one glorious reality blazed, 'For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (*1 Corinthians 1:18*).

This is an astonishing association: the cross of Christ and the power of God. The then popular Greek/Roman way of thinking considered death on a cross as a harsh but necessary way to deal with certain criminals. To associate this execution method, therefore, with the wisdom of the gods was seen as foolish stupidity. In the opinion of the Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, F.F. Bruce (gen.ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1987), p.3.

people, some of whom were scattered through the Roman Empire, death on the cross was abhorrent. To relate this kind of death with the promised Messiah was offensive.

Not for Paul. The historical death of Jesus of Nazareth, and his subsequent resurrection from the dead, is God's powerful fulfilment of Israel's hopes. So too the cross of Christ is God's appointed way for non-Jews to enter into his promises and blessings. The cross and the power of God are not contradictory. In Paul's preaching, teaching and writing the two are inextricably linked. God's power is presented in the death of his Son on a Roman cross and his glorious resurrection two days later. Simultaneously, the ignominy and scandal of the cross are transformed by God's power into the means of peace.

The convergence of God's power and the cross of Christ provides men and women with what they cannot achieve on their own: salvation. Saved from what? From the inevitable consequences of our human rebellion and autonomy from the one true God. Those who respond to the news of Christ crucified, can be rescued from what we deserve: just, legitimate and fair divine judgement. In this gospel of Christ crucified and risen, God himself is pleased and powerful to free people in a way which upholds what is true and right and, at the same time, pardons and loves. With this message Paul entered Corinth with a confidence and boldness. He was convinced people should hear this good news, in the best of times and in the worst of times. Times like ours.

However, if the Greeks and Jews of first century Corinth were disturbed by the message of Christ crucified, our contemporaries are too. How can we explain this

essential truth to our post-Christian society and non-Christian friends at the end of the twentieth century? In what ways can we help Christians know and experience on a moment by moment basis the life-giving power of the cross? We are thankful for the recent written contributions by Michael Green, John Stott and Joanna and Alister McGrath.<sup>2</sup> Their respective studies help us ‘earth’ our theological understanding of the cross with our day to day experiences. Likewise, the scholarly and technical works by Leon Morris, Martin Hengel and Jürgen Moltmann, while not univocal, aid our doctrinal comprehension.<sup>3</sup>

Still, in our present, post-modern society, we need all the help we can find. In this lecture I seek to recommend a resource who can facilitate the Church’s proclamation, ministry and experience. Three reasons stand out. First, this resource understood how central and vital the cross of Jesus is in God’s plan to rescue us to his praise and glory. Second, my recommended resource was able to explain the cross with a very impressive and incisive theological mind. We can find

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Green, *The Empty Cross of Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984); John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986); and Joanna and Alister McGrath, *The Dilemma of Self-Esteem: The Cross and Christian Confidence* (Wheaton, Ill, and Cambridge, England: Crossway Books, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> See Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1955); *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1965) and *The Atonement: its meaning and significance* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983); Martin Hengel, *The Atonement*, John Bowden (tr.), (London: SCM, 1981); and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974).

help in our present day's theological confusion and silliness, which sadly exists in too many evangelical churches. Thirdly, this resource knew not only the cross of Christ but also the human heart. Here is no detached guidance. It fits the realities, or we can say, the 'stuff' of life. Who would not want such help?

Help can come from one John Owen. He lived in the seventeenth century, and was in what people call the English Calvinist or puritan camp. Of course, I appreciate that some will decline the offer. Help from an old-time Calvinist? From an English puritan?

Admittedly, the word, puritan, is not normally regarded favourably. To call some one a puritan today is to suggest they are up-tight, legalistic and particularly censorious. Puritans of old have received rather bad press in many circles. Not only is this unfortunate, it is erroneous. Let me explain by first defining puritan and then introducing puritan spirituality.

There is confusion about what exactly the word puritan means. In the sixteenth century, it was a term of derision. Subsequently, it is not easy to define who and what were the puritans. There is no scholarly consensus about the precise meaning of puritan.<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, however, think of puritan as a way of classifying a conflict of conscience among certain English Protestants during the reign of Elizabeth I

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<sup>4</sup> See especially Paul Christianson, 'Reformers and the Church of England under Elizabeth I and the Early Stuarts', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, (31:4), 1980, pp.463-82 and in the same issue, Patrick Collinson, 'A Comment: concerning the name Puritan'.

(1558-1603). This conflict was a struggle amongst basically like-minded protestants, who had been influenced by certain Church Fathers, Augustine in the fifth century, the Reformation theology of Martin Luther and, especially, John Calvin.

The battle concerned the English Church: how far would it go to become a truly reformed church? Some thought it had gone far enough by the 1580s, others thought it was only 'halfly reformed'. Those who pushed for fuller reformation, and who were frustrated with Elizabeth's 'tarrying', became known as puritans. The protest came from a theological conviction that for the sake of the godly and the elect, which some saw as the nation, certain matters of church government and liturgics were unedifying.

Some puritans became Separatists, separating from the Elizabethan Church. During the subsequent reigns of James I (1603-1625) and Charles I (1625-1649) puritan sentiment and practice fragmented into different political and ecclesiastical expressions. The Independents and Congregationalists of the seventeenth century come to mind. In this sense, there is a continuity between Elizabethan puritanism and seventeenth century non-conformity. This means, therefore, that puritan has a shifting meaning, describing a frustration born in the time of Elizabeth I and which continued in subtle ways into and through the seventeenth century. However, let me point out the driving force of what might look initially to be only a partisan protest movement. I refer to puritan spirituality. This is what should grab us and correct any misapprehensions.

As I have written elsewhere, puritan spirituality

embraced life and sought a spirituality which honoured God in the whole of life.<sup>5</sup> Puritan spirituality was not quietistic, it was actively social and political. They were passionately concerned with doctrine and the purity of the church. Puritan preaching and writing displays a robustness and liveliness. Many longed for a society in which religious tolerance, better education, social welfare and democracy would be the outward manifestations of a godly society.

Their teaching on the individual Christian life was comprehensive and vigorous. Puritan preachers strove to integrate doctrine with experience. Members of puritan congregations were encouraged to take their experiences seriously, even analytically. The day-to-day life of faith was vital to understand. This theology is epitomized in the Westminster *Confession* and Catechisms.<sup>6</sup> Such practical theology was received in rural areas and in cities. It was not exclusively reserved for the wealthy or the poor. It stressed reading Scripture, hearing God's Word preached, meeting together with the 'godly', and measuring one's growth in

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<sup>5</sup> Gavin J. McGrath, *Grace and Duty in Puritan Spirituality* Grove Booklet Spirituality Series No.37 (Bramcote, Notts.: Grove Books, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Both were produced by the Westminster Assembly, which met 1643-1649. The Assembly was a council summoned by Parliament to provide advice to the civil authorities. The *Confession* and two catechisms, as well as a *Directory for Public Worship*, were produced.

grace and progress in the life of faith.<sup>7</sup>

Puritan theology gave considerable attention to the believer's experience. It was not just a case of knowing doctrine, a person had to experience the reality behind the doctrine. The puritan preacher and pastor was expected to help the 'godly' experience truth: he was to feed his flock, and in so doing become the physician of their souls. In addition to preaching and visiting, the pastor wrote books and pamphlets in order to give pastoral care to the greatest number of people.

With this preliminary explanation of puritan, let us proceed to one of the giants of the puritan period, John Owen. We want to stand on his shoulders, and for some very good reasons.

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<sup>7</sup> The helpful books on puritan spirituality, covering a variety of aspects are: William K.B. Stoever, *'A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven'. Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1978); Dewey D. Wallace, *Puritans and Predestination. Grace in English Protestant Theology 1525-1695* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Paul Seaver, *Wallington's World. A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth Century London* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1985); John Von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought*. American Academy of Religion, Studies in Religion, Number 45 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); and Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

## 2. The Life of John Owen: A Brief Look at a Towering Figure

John Owen was born in 1616 in Oxfordshire. Little is known about Owen's early days. There are few autobiographical insights gained from his published works or the correspondence that survives. We do know his father, Henry, was a clergyman sympathetic to puritan sentiment and exercised a non-conformist ministry in Stadham.

In 1631 John followed his older brother, William, to Oxford. A student at Queen's College, he was admitted to the degree of B.A. in 1632 and his M.A. in 1635. Oxford at that time underwent changes, largely due to the influence and reforming concerns of William Laud.<sup>8</sup> What Owen thought about the growing influence of what some contemporaries believed to be Laud's Arminianism (a term I will explain shortly), is difficult to ascertain. It is known that he eventually left Oxford in 1637, and in all probability this had much to do with the implications of Laudianism and Arminianism.

After leaving Oxford Owen spent time in the private service of, first, Sir Robert Dormer, as a tutor for his son, and then as chaplain to one Lord Lovelace. In 1643 he accepted

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<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Tyacke provides the best overview of Arminianism at Oxford during this period. Tyacke details how Oxford was different from Cambridge during this period: Oxford Arminians were far more assertive. Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists. The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp.78-86.

the living at Fordham in Essex, a living offered to him by Parliament. Already Owen's non-conformist inclinations were evident.

Owen was forced to leave Fordham by the patron in 1646 and became minister to a gathered church at Coggeshall, Essex. St. Peter's was a puritan stronghold: the Earl of Warwick, to whom Owen dedicated his work on the atonement, *Salus Electorum Sanguis Jesu* (1648) was the patron. His immediate predecessor was Obadiah Sedgwick, a member of the Westminster Assembly. It was here that Owen's Independency developed. Furthermore, his preaching at Coggeshall must have been impressive, for one record reports that on some Sundays close to 2,000 came to listen to him.<sup>9</sup>

John Owen's ministry and influence grew beyond the boundaries of Fordham and Coggeshall. His first publication, *A Display of Anninianism* (1643) was dedicated to the Parliamentary Committee of Religion. Furthermore, at the close of the first Civil War, he was invited to preach before Parliament, at one of its fast-day meetings on 29 April 1646.<sup>10</sup>

In 1647 he was introduced to Henry Ireton, Oliver Cromwell's son-in-law, and other officers of the New Model Army at the time of the battle of Colchester. As the second Civil War ensued, Owen too was involved in ministry to the

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<sup>9</sup> John Asty, "Memoirs of the Life of John Owen," in *A Complete Collection of the Sermons of the Reverend and Learned John Owen D.D.* (London: 1721) p. vii. Quoted in Toon, *God's Statesman*, p.26.

<sup>10</sup> Owen, *A Vision of Unchangeable Free Mercy* (1646). Goold : 8, pp.5-41.

Army, beginning with those under the command of General Fairfax. He continued to gain the favourable regard of Parliament, culminating, if we can put it this way, in his call to preach after the execution of Charles I on 30 January 1649.<sup>11</sup>

Owen's influence upon the affairs and leaders of the nation reached its apex through his relationship with Oliver Cromwell.<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly his preaching skill, manifested on those occasions when he preached before Parliament, was noted by Cromwell. Cromwell met Owen, in April/May of 1649 through General Fairfax.

In 1651 Oliver Cromwell appointed Owen Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, an appointment he held until 1659.<sup>13</sup> In 1652 he became Vice-Chancellor.<sup>14</sup> His years at Oxford were not idle. Besides exercising a number of reforms to student life and attempts to enhance lecturers' pay, he joined forces with Thomas Goodwin, then president of Magdalen College, in a preaching ministry at St. Mary's Church.<sup>15</sup> From

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<sup>11</sup> This was later published as *Righteous Zeal Encouraged by Divine Protection* (1649), Goold: 8.

<sup>12</sup> Toon, *The Correspondence of John Owen (1616-1683)* (Cambridge and London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1970) provides a total of seventeen items of correspondence between Cromwell and Owen: 13 from Cromwell to Owen, 4 from Owen to Cromwell. These letters are predominately concerned with practical matters regarding Oxford.

<sup>13</sup> See Toon, *Correspondence*, #3, pp.52-53.

<sup>14</sup> See Toon, *Correspondence*, #13, pp.62-63; #24, p.74; #35, pp.84-85; and #45, p.94. It was a position which had to be renewed each year.

<sup>15</sup> Goodwin was appointed president of Magdalen by Cromwell at the same time Owen was recommended to Christ Church. Toon, *Correspondence*, #3, p.53.

this shared preaching ministry, during 1652-57, Owen produced some of his more significant pastoral works, eventually published for a wider audience as *On the Mortification of Sin* (1656) and *Of the Nature and Power of Temptation* (1658). When we think of today's university Christian gatherings, it is amazing to note that both of these works were first preached mainly to young Oxford students!

With the return of the monarchy, Owen's political influence diminished. In 1659/60 he was removed from Christ Church and subsequently moved to Stadhampton. Apart from his involvement in 1667 to persuade Parliament to pass a Toleration Act, his life and ministry shifted more towards matters of church polity and to his theological writing. There was the notable invitation from the First Congregational in Boston, New England, to become their pastor. This church, earlier led by John Cotton and latterly by John Norton, was well known to Owen, but for reasons known only to himself he declined the offer.<sup>16</sup> His ministry moved to London, and by 1673 his Congregational flock combined with the Leadenhall church formerly led by the recently deceased Joseph Caryl.

In this final period of Owen's life a large proportion of his works were published; he was a prodigious writer. Equally, Owen's leadership role amongst Congregationalists was at its height. Sadly, he experienced the personal loss of

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<sup>16</sup> Toon, *Correspondence*, #71, pp.135-36 is a transcription of a letter from the General Court of Massachusetts affirming and ratifying this invitation to Owen. Later in 1671 Owen was invited to become President of Harvard: this too he declined.

his first wife, Mary, who died in 1675. A year later, however, he married Dorothy D'Oyley. In supposed retirement at Ealing, yet in failing health, Owen produced his *Meditations on the Glory of Christ*, which perhaps tells us something of his thoughts and concerns in those last months. John Owen died on 24 August 1683.

### 3. **The Theological Battles of Owen's Times**

If we are to read Owen properly, and understand the specific context of his practical writings, we must briefly explain the theological battles of his day. I refer to some of the terms I introduced earlier: Arminianism and Antinomianism.

Remember, puritan theology originated out of Reformed theology. The history of Christian theology, however, is rarely cut and dry; this is the case when we try to understand seventeenth century Reformed theology. By the seventeenth century the theological scene on the Continent and in England began to change. Principally, there was a reaction against a rigid a view of predestination. Most noteworthy was the criticism by the Dutch thinker, Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609).

Arminianism, as it was later called, has been described as a 'protest against those tenets in the theology of the Reformed Church that dealt with God's Election and Reprobation of individuals to eternal life or death.'<sup>17</sup> Arminianism spread on the Continent as a counter-reaction to Calvinist orthodoxy. Jim Packer identifies its main contentions:

1. Though sinful, it is not beyond the ability of humans to respond 'savingly' to the gospel when it is presented to them.

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<sup>17</sup> A.W. Harrison, *Arminianism* (London: Duckworth, 1937), Preface.

2. Humans are not so controlled by God that they cannot, if they so choose, reject the gospel.
3. God does not elect those who will be saved through sovereign predestination but foresees that certain people will become Christians in their life-time.
4. Christ's death did not, in and of itself, establish the salvation of anyone, but created the possibility of salvation for everyone if they believed.
5. It is up to the believer to continue in faith, trusting in God; but if a person chooses to turn from God, he or she can fall away, ultimately losing salvation.<sup>18</sup>

Orthodox Calvinism responded to Arminianism, particularly in the Synod of Dort (1618-19): pushing further the ideas of supralapsarianism (God chose his elect before the Fall of Adam and Eve), limited atonement, unconditional and irresistible grace, total human inability, and the assurance of the final perseverance of the elect. The battle lines were drawn, and the ensuing theological debates became fierce.

Arminianism in England was not merely an English reaction to a Dutch conflict. By the time of the Synod of Dort there was already a reaction against orthodox Calvinism. The battle had begun, and with the reluctance of James I and Charles I to embrace the canons of Dort conflict continued the next twenty years. The Arminian theology of Richard Neile, Bishop of Durham, Lancelot Andrewes, Bishop of

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<sup>18</sup> J.I. Packer, *Among God's Giants* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991), p. 166.

Winchester and John Cosin, Neile's successor to Durham stressed a dislike of predestinarian language. By 1628 the Arminian faction had gained significant ecclesiastical power within the English Church: clear Arminians such as Richard Neile and William Laud were in positions of leadership. In 1633 the death of Archbishop Abbot made way for Laud to move to Canterbury. Thus, even before Owen began his ministry, Arminianism was an important element in the theological and ecclesiastical context.

What does this tell us? We need to appreciate the practical implications of Arminianism. The puritan pastor wanted his congregation to be active and responsible. At the same time he would not want them to think that it was their activity, including their response in faith, which instigated their life in Christ. Arminianism challenged rigid predestinarianism. English Calvinists accused English Arminians of giving too great an emphasis to human freedom, choice and response. Some puritans, notably Owen, accused them of exalting human capability over divine grace.

Another aspect of the context in which Owen pastored, preached and wrote was Antinomianism. This was a movement within English Protestantism which rejected orthodox Calvinism's use of the law.<sup>19</sup> It was a reaction against Orthodox Calvinism just as much as Arminianism, but in an entirely different direction. Whereas Arminianism argued that the Orthodox Calvinists minimized human ability, Antinomians challenged the Orthodox for giving too much attention to human choice and responsibility.

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<sup>19</sup> See Von Rohr, *Covenant of Grace*, p. 50.

Antinomians criticized the idea that a person's faith and repentance somehow qualified him or her to enter the covenant. This would be to give too much importance to the human side of regeneration. Antinomians like John Saltmarsh (1612-1647), Tobias Crisp (1600-1643) and John Eaton (dc.1575-1642)<sup>20</sup> claimed that the act of justification was not dependent upon the performance of the believer's faith. They insisted that Christ's death alone procured the salvation of the elect unconditionally: the believer's faith in no way merited justification, Christ satisfied all.

Antinomianism was threatening. It seemed to some critics of Antinomianism that if Christ believed and repented for the elect, then it did not matter what the elect did - either before or after they came to faith. Extreme Antinomian sects only made things worse with their moral laxity and extreme permissiveness: done in the name of liberty from the law. This was alarming, especially when the country was caught up in a civil war and the world appeared upside down.

Arminianism and Antinomianism, then, were the two poles between which Owen's theology was expressed, and he has to be read with an eye on these movements. Often his practical theology and spirituality responded to either Arminian emphasis on human activity or Antinomian excesses. Of course, a believer's experience is never an either/or situation. Owen tried to define a middle ground,

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<sup>20</sup> Of importance are the following illustrative works: Saltmarsh, *Free Grace; or, the Flowings of Christ's Blood freely to sinners* (1645); Eaton, *The Honey-Combe of Free Justification by Christ alone* (1642); Tobias Crisp, *Christ Alone Exalted, in Fourteen Sermons* (1643).

and this was no easy task. At various points in his arguments we may wonder if some of his views are extreme. Provided we appreciate his concern to integrate doctrine with experience we will see the fuller significance. Owen's theology was rarely abstract; it was forged in the heat of theological battles and people's struggles. This is apparent as we flow turn to his understanding of the cross of Christ. Four main and vital themes are all we have space to present. Each relates to up-to-date issues and concerns facing us in our experience and ministries as we work to preach Christ crucified.

### 3.1. *The Cross of Christ and God's Sovereignty*

Have you been to St. Paul's Cathedral in London and seen the famous painting by Holman Hunt? It vividly conveys the sense of Revelation 3:20, 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.' Hunt's painting portrays a lantern-carrying Jesus, knocking on a door. There is no handle on the outside of the door. Presumably only the owner of the house can open the door and let Jesus inside. The painting seems to ask, 'Will the door open, or will it remain closed and Jesus move on?'

It is a powerful and emotive image of the reality Christians know from personal experience. While Revelation 3:20 does not *directly* or *contextually* relate to unbelievers, many of us became Christians in response to an evangelistic talk or explanation which employed this passage. 'Christ is waiting. He wants to have a personal relationship with you', we were told. 'He won't force himself on you. It's up to you.'

Do you and I preach like this, when we preach the cross

of Christ? I hope we do preach for a decision, for a response. However, much of today's evangelism places a premium on a person's ability to decide for Christ or 'inviting Jesus into your heart'. As a result, either Jesus is one of life's many spiritual options or the God of the universe is just as uncertain as the evangelist and organising committee. No wonder our evangelism and preaching lacks a little something. What would John Owen tell us?

He would remind us that men and women are invited by God to enter into the new covenant through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a work of God's mercy. He summons all people to repentance. Yet it is always a *sovereign* mercy and summons. Too easily we lose sight of this. Consequently, our evangelism is deficient and our pastoral theology is inadequate.

Owen stressed the absolute certainty of God's will: a certainty not at all because of mere foreknowledge regarding human agency, but a foreknowledge of that which he decreed. He wrote, 'whatever God doth in time bring to pass, that he decreed from all eternity so to do: all his works were from the beginning known unto him.'<sup>21</sup> Owen insisted that this is the basis of the believer's confidence and assurance:

It is no small comfort to be assured that we do, nor can, suffer nothing, but what his hand and counsel guides unto us: what is open, and naked before his eyes, and whose end and issue he knoweth long before: which is a strong motive

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<sup>21</sup> Owen, *A Display of Arminianism* (1643), Russell: 5, pp.19-20. All further references to this work are simply, *Arminianism*.

to patience, a sure anchor of hope, a firm ground of consolation.<sup>22</sup>

God's immutable character defines his will and thus guarantees the certainty of his will for the future. What is Owen driving at here?

Owen's understanding of the divine initiative shaped his view of the death of Christ. He argued that Christ's death was not universal — for all men and women. Rather, Christ only died, according to the will of the Father, to save the elect. He was not questioning the sufficiency of Christ's death. Instead, the issue was with the end of his death. We would today call it the purpose or aim of Christ's death.

As he put it in 1648:

The summe of all is: the death and bloodshedding of Jesus Christ hath wrought, and doth effectually procure, for all those that are concerned in it, eternal redemption, consisting in grace here, and glory hereafter.<sup>23</sup>

The death and intercession of Christ could not be said to have been in vain or merely to establish a conditional covenant of pardon; it had a specific and absolute end:

To save sinners; not open a door for them to come in, if they will or can; not to make a way passable, that they may

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<sup>22</sup> Owen, *Arminianism*, p.29.

<sup>23</sup> Owen, *Salus Electorum Sanguis Jesu or the Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1648), p.3. All further references to this work are simply, *Death of Death*.

be saved; not to purchase reconciliation and pardon of his Father, which perhaps they shall never enjoy; but actually to save them from all their guilt and power of sinne, and from the wrath of God for sinne, which if he doth not accomplish, he fails of the end of his coming; and if that ought not to be affirmed, surely he came for no more than towards whom that effect is procured.<sup>24</sup>

Yet does not all this talk of sovereign election only lead to an impossible position concerning evangelism? If people are elected, and this is God's will, then what is the point of evangelistic preaching when we urge people to hear and respond to the gospel? However logical these questions seem, they are absurd and unhelpful. We never know from the outset who the elect are.

We say, though God hath chosen some only to salvation by Christ, yet that the names of those some are not expressed in Scripture; the doing whereof would have been destructive to the main end of the word, the nature of faith, and all the ordinances of the gospel; yet God having declared that whosoever believeth shall be saved, there is sufficient ground for all and every man in the world, to whom the gospel is preached, to come to God by Christ, and other ground there is none, nor can be offered by the assertors of the pretended universality of God's love.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, it is *through* Spirit-anointed preaching and teaching of the Bible, which is at the heart of sound evangelism, that the elect are called, converted and begin the

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<sup>24</sup> Owen, *Death of Death*, p.151; cf. pp.61-64.

<sup>25</sup> Owen, *Vindicae Evangelicae* (1655), Russell: 9, p.197

life of faith. As Owen put it, 'For they [preachers] are used and employed in the work it self by the Spirit of God, and are by him made instrumental for the effecting of this new birth and life.'<sup>26</sup>

To be sure, an individual is not regenerate and pardoned until he or she believes and repents. In this sense Owen was denying a justification from eternity. Christ's death accomplishes God's sovereign purposes while, simultaneously, there is no actual completion or fulfilment of this purpose for the individual until the time he or she repents and believes. 'Things have their certain fruition,' wrote Owen, 'not instant actual existence, from the eternal purposes of God concerning them.'<sup>27</sup> Even the elect are very much under the wrath and judgment of God for sin until they are converted.

The state or condition of those for whom Christ died, is not actually and really changed by his death in itself; but they lie under the curse, whilst they are in the state of nature, unregenerate, and all the effects of sin whatever. That which is procured for them, is left in the hand of the Father; they are not in the least intrusted with it, until the

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<sup>26</sup> Owen, *Πνευματολογία ; or a Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* (1674), p.188. All further references to this work are simply, *Holy Spirit*.

<sup>27</sup> Owen, *Of the Death of Christ, the Price He Paid, and the Purchase He Made* (1650), Russell: 5, p.611. All further references to this work are simply, *Death of Christ*.

appointed time do come.<sup>28</sup>

Their faith and trust are established not merely by the decree of election but through the death of Christ. By his death Christ actually procures the fruit of his death.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, in the covenant of works God commanded perfect obedience but in the covenant of grace God himself promises that the elect will be given the faith which the covenant demands. No one can ever, on their own, repent and believe; only God can bring about this. Owen insisted that even the faith required was given absolutely through the death of Christ. It was this absolute provision which Owen argued made the covenant of grace superior to the first covenant.<sup>30</sup> Let us move on to the second main theme to see what he meant. Again, our goal is to strengthen our commitment to proclaim the crucified Saviour in our generation.

### 3.2. *The Cross of Christ and God's Judgement*

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<sup>28</sup> Owen, *Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance Explained and Confirmed* (1654), Goold: 2: pp.403-04. All further references to this work are simply, *Perseverance*.

<sup>29</sup> Owen, *Death of Death*, pp. 87, 101-112 and 163.

<sup>30</sup> Owen, *Death of Death*, pp. 103-04.

At the heart of Christianity is the death of Jesus on a cross.<sup>31</sup> Certainly, his resurrection speaks of life and hope, but why do the New Testament writers link his exaltation with his death? They claim his lordship and kingship are predicated upon his willingness to die (Philippians 2:9-9). Why then did Jesus of Nazareth have to die? Why is his death so important?

Fundamentally, it was the will of God. Quite understandably, the modern mind recoils in horror and distaste at the proposition that God demanded the innocent sufferings of Jesus to be appeased and satisfied. Stated this baldly it has a discordant ring. However, it was according to the *good, loving and gracious purpose of God*.

The shedding of blood was required, and there was a divine necessity for satisfaction; both are inextricable in God's loving and merciful plan.<sup>32</sup> The New Testament writers weave the various emphases on Jesus' death around God's glory and

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<sup>31</sup> Many would prefer to stress the life of Jesus, and his teaching. I certainly do not seek to reduce the life of Christ Jesus. On the other hand, I argue that the crucial importance of Jesus' earthly life and ministry is his death. This is the New Testament writers' primary, although not sole, focus. Leon Morris' point is well made, 'But our examination of the evidence leads us to think that the view that 'the blood' directs our attention primarily to 'the life' is erroneous, and that, in point of fact, the Scriptures of both Old and New Testaments stress the death when they make use of this expression... the impression left by those biblical passages which refer to the blood of Christ is that they are pointing us to the death of the Lord considered as the means whereby sin is dealt with, not merely the means whereby man may be inspired to deal with it.' Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, pp.276-77.

<sup>32</sup> See the following passages: Mark 8:31 and 9:12; Luke 24:45,46; John 3:16; Acts 2:23; 3:18; and 1 Corinthians 15:3.

love. The different words and expressions used concerning Christ's death speak of a multi-faceted significance and accomplishment: ransom, redemption, to buy out of slavery, an example, to bear away or to take away sin, a sacrifice of atonement or propitiation, and the means to disarm the powers of evil. Throughout history these different themes have been underlined. The death of Christ has been explained in the light of example, substitution and rescuing power. All are present in the New Testament. It is *normally* wise not to stress unduly one over against the other. There is a unity.

Nevertheless, it is common among many today to play down the idea of substitutionary atonement. Yet, to dismiss outright the idea of substitution and satisfaction is to raise more problems than it attempts to displace. Powerlessness and oppression are not our only problems, we face the moral dilemma of guilt. Apart from the substitutionary death of Jesus, the holy justice of God and the seriousness of human sin cannot be *justly* reconciled.

Why accent justice? It is because of the glory and majesty of God. If there is no justice, God is not a God whom we can trust or worship. We would live in a universe of indifference. Even on a human level we know that justice is a necessity. Without justice societies fall either into anarchy or oppressive totalitarianism. Our awareness of this importance is a reflection of God's character. He is a God of holy justice.

Modern people risk missing the ultimate issue: humanity's standing before a particular God. The one true and only God with whom we must deal is pure, true, majestic, holy and just. This is why sin, human rebellion against God matters. Our generation denies this constantly.

Before we come to faith, we may think this is irrelevant. Surely, God's business is to forgive and let live! The Bible, however, focuses on the greater issue of justice, what is right. Why should God forgive without dealing with the transgression of his law and standards? It is not simply a question of conforming to an external code; it is congruity to truth, the very character of God.

This is why the Bible frequently speaks of the wrath of God against sin.<sup>33</sup> Sin is non-truth in an active, relational and moral sphere: the relationship of humanity with its creator. Accordingly, a right verdict is delivered by a holy God against all that is the opposite of his nature. At the same time, the Bible tells us God wills to save people from this just consequence. What is God's solution, one both just and loving? The better we understand this the sounder our evangelism will be and the richer our pastoral care will be. Allow John Owen to help us.

According to Owen, the punishment due to men and women demanded in the law (the old covenant, or the covenant of works) was real. Christ, however, paid the penalty in substitution for the elect (Galatians 3:13). The punishment was a full condemnation of sin; God did this in Christ (Romans 8:30) and the condemning of sin was the infliction of the penalty. Christ underwent actual death (cf. Genesis 2:11 and Hebrews 2:14). It is not just that an angry God chose to

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<sup>33</sup> See Deuteronomy 9:8; Psalms 21:9; 85:3; 90:11; Isaiah 9:19; 26:20; Jeremiah 3:5; 7:29; Ezekiel 22:20-31; Habakkuk 3:2; Matthew 3:7; John 3:36; Romans 1:18; 3:5; Ephesians 2:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; and Revelation 6:16-17.

punish his pure and innocent Son. Most importantly, in him, as the substitute ransom, believers are joined or incorporated. Faith joins believers with Jesus, the crucified and risen Saviour. The mystical, but real, union Christ has with his people enables them to see and experience Jesus as *the accepted Saviour*.

In 1653 John Owen published *De Diatriba Justitia*, the English title, *A Dissertation on Divine Justice*. This work was a response to a line of thought called Socinianism. Following the views of the rationalist, Lelio Sozzini (1525- 62), Socinianism essentially viewed the cross of Christ as a morally persuasive means to demonstrate God's love and pardon to sinners. The idea of God demanding Christ's death for divine satisfaction of justice was denied. Socinian writers with whom Owen battled, notably one John Biddle, did not accept the notion of divine necessity for appeasement and atonement. Owen argued that God must punish sin, not because he is compelled by some law outside of himself. Rather, God cannot co-exist with sin. Accordingly, punitive judgment is from God, not only because of his will but in accordance with his nature. To quote Owen:

That justice is not a free act of divine will, which God may use or renounce at pleasure; nor is sin only a debt of ours, which as we were unable to pay, he might forgive, by only freely receding from his right: for what reason then could be assigned why the Father of mercies should so severely punish his most holy Son on our account, that he might, according to justice, deliver us from our sins ... for sin is that ineffable evil, which would overturn God's whole right

over his creatures, unless it were punished.<sup>34</sup>

Owen insisted that Christ did not endure eternal death, because of the dignity of his person. He is the Son of God. Yet the obligation that death occur under the first covenant was met fully by Christ. ‘He charged upon him, and imputed unto him all the sins of all the elect, and proceeded against him accordingly.’<sup>35</sup> He went on to argue,

Christ underwent not only that wrath, (taking it passively) which the elect were under, but that also, which they should have undergone, had not he borne it for them. He delivered them from the wrath to come.<sup>36</sup>

His substitution was not just an acceptable sacrifice, it was in strict terms a full satisfaction. In another work, entitled, *Of the Death of Christ, the Price he Paid, and the Purchase He Made* (1650), he wrote, ‘There is a sameness in Christ’s sufferings with that in the obligation in respect of essence, and equivalency in respect of attendencies.’<sup>37</sup> Faith, then, joins us with this substitute - who, in his incarnation, identified with his people. It is this second Adam, the Lamb of God, in whom we find legitimate forgiveness, ransom and the hope of resurrection life.

In our generation, when Christians speak of the cross the tendency is to explain Christ’s death as an act of love for

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<sup>34</sup> Owen, *Diatriba de Divina Justitia seu Justitiae Vindicatricis Vindicae*; or *A Dissertation on Divine Justice* (1653), Russell: 9, pp. 500-01.

<sup>35</sup> Owen, *Death of Death*, p.160.

<sup>36</sup> Owen, *Death of Death*, p.160.

<sup>37</sup> Owen, *Death of Christ*, p.448.

us. It most certainly was! Furthermore, it is often explained Christ identifies himself with our weaknesses and pain. This is true! However, if this is all we show when we ask our contemporaries to ‘look’ at the cross of Christ, it is a short-sighted perspective. In a subtle, and insidious manner, it elevates our humanity and minimises the superior character of God. Christ did not die for his us only because we are weak, hurting and broken people (which of course we are!) but because a holy God sought to reconcile himself with those whom he would save. Today we need this balance and precision, for as Owen reminds us: ‘... in dying for us Christ did not only aim at our good, but also directly died in our stead. The punishment due to our sin and the chastisement of our peace was upon him ...’<sup>38</sup>

What does this mean for the believer? An overwhelming sense of joyful assurance. As Owen explained,

... the main foundation of all the confidence and assurance whereof in this life, we may be partakers, (which amounts to joy unspeakable, and full of glory) ariseth from this strict connexion of the oblation and intercession of Jesus Christ, that by the one he hath procured all good things for us, and by the other he will procure them to be actually bestowed; whereby he doth never leave our sinnes but follows them into every court, until they be fully pardoned, and clearly expiated, Heb. 9.26. He will never leave us until he hath saved, to the utter most, them that come unto God by him ...<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Owen, *Death of Death*, p.19.

<sup>39</sup> Owen, *Death of Death*, p.34.

Owen has much to teach us here. His aid could well strengthen our evangelism and, equally, our pastoral counselling. There will be a final day of accountability for the entire human race. On the other hand, when we repent and believe in the gospel, we are truly and justly pardoned. We need not fear the condemning accusations of either our conscience or Satan, the enemy of our souls. When God pardons us in Christ, we are free indeed. How great a proclamation this is for all of us. For some, the past suggests too many errors and wasted moments in wrong living. Others find their present battles almost overwhelming. Their guilt screams too loudly. Yet, a louder, more dominant declaration resonates from heaven. On that day when we stand before the judgement throne of God, if we are a Christian now in this life, no one will justly condemn us before God. God will not, Satan cannot, even our conscience may not. This is why we preach Christ crucified.

### ***3.3. The Cross of Christ and Christian Holiness***

If I may be allowed a homely illustration, have you ever tried your hand at making soup? Part of the skill is the occasional tasting and adding of additional herbs and seasoning. Experience yields knowledge which results in good flavour. A good cook can taste and know what is missing. I

Do we have the relative skill in Christian living? When we look at our personal lives, and the life of our churches, can we tell what crucial ingredient is not present? Here is my point. If we are honest about ourselves, a character trait easier to claim than to possess, we must confess that as Christians in the 1990s there is something vital missing in our life. We sense an absence of a 'something' when we consider the overall consistency of our faithfulness to the gospel. There is,

to use a different metaphor, a poor connection between the splendour of the gospel and the day-to-day character of our life. What explains this?

We lack holiness. It is not that we do not exhort one another to live holy lives or even long for holiness. Rather our understanding of holiness, true holiness, is poor. With a poor understanding of holiness what we long for and exhort to see in Christian communities is always inadequate. Yet, here too John Owen can aid us, and his assistance is remarkably up-to-date. As he helps us understand the nature of holiness and its necessity, he offers us encouragement with a state-of-the-art pastoral skill.

Owen's view of holiness is comprehensive. Holiness encompasses and fills the whole of Christian experience and practical living. 'Holiness, whereof faith is the root, and obedience the body,' he wrote, 'is that whereunto, and not for which, we are elected.'<sup>40</sup> But what precisely is holiness, or as Owen also called it, sanctification?

Sanctification is an immediate work of the Spirit of God on the soul 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 to the Tenor and Terms of the New Covenant, by vertue of the Life and

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<sup>40</sup> Owen, *Arminianism*, p.119.

## Death of Jesus Christ.<sup>41</sup>

As this quote reveals, Owen focused on the internal working of the Holy Spirit. It is his work in our lives, by which he changes us progressively into conformity with Jesus. Notice holiness has to do with combating sin and growing into renewal; holiness also concerns the whole of our humanity.

At the same time, do not miss the foundation of Owen's argument. Holiness is established and according to Christ's atoning toil on the cross for his people. In his major study on the atonement, Owen insisted,

So that our sanctification, with all other effects of free grace, are the immediate procurement of the death of Christ. And of the things that have been spoken this is the summe, sanctification and holiness, is the certain fruit and effect of the death of Christ, in all them for whom he dyed...<sup>42</sup>

Owen was writing at a time when it was far too easy for people to think that holy living was a matter of willpower and self-resolution. Moralism, namely the tendency to strive for the marks of a Christian character without entering a personal relationship with Christ, was a threat in Owen's generation.

We might think this danger is non-existent in our late-twentieth century society. Nonetheless, as voices decry our

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<sup>41</sup> Owen, *Holy Spirit*, p.338.

<sup>42</sup> Owen, *Death of Death*, p.121.

modern moral breakdown, listen closely to their assumptions. Moral improvement, or a return to so-called traditional values, faces a major obstacle: the sinful hearts of men and women. Christian morality (which is true, authentic human living), without reverence for Christ is impossible.

Only as a man or woman is converted, filled with the Holy Spirit, is holiness possible. The point of reference is not human morality but conformity to Christ. Only the Lord brings about this supernatural work in us.

And this belongs unto the Establishment of our Faith, that he who prepared, sanctified, and glorified the human nature, the natural body of Jesus Christ, the head of the Church, hath undertaken to prepare, sanctifie and glorifie his mystical body, or all the Elect given unto him of the Father.<sup>43</sup>

To quote Owen at length:

No person therefore, whatever, who hath not been made partaker of the washing of regeneration and the renovation of the Holy Ghost, can possibly have any union with Christ. I do not speak this as though our purifying were in order of time or nature antecedent unto our union with Christ, for indeed it is an effect thereof. But it is such an effect as immediately and inseparably accompanyeth it; so that where the one is not, there is not the other. The act whereby he unites us unto himself, is the same that whereby he cleanseth our natures.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Owen, *Holy Spirit*, p.155.

<sup>44</sup> Owen, *Holy Spirit*, p.406.

Does this mean, however, that we simply sit back and do nothing in our personal growth in holiness? Are we meant to 'let go, let God'? John Owen's answer was no. In no way are we to see ourselves totally passive. Owen reminds us, we are called to a Spirit-prompted active involvement.

He that thinks to please God, and to come to the enjoyment of him without holiness, makes him an unholy God, putting the highest indignity and dishonour imaginable upon him. God deliver poor sinners from this deceit. There is no remedy, you must leave your sins, or your God.<sup>45</sup>

Assuredly, this is the most pertinent point in our analysis of our contemporary predicament. Whether it be in the area of our sexuality, understanding of power, use of money and sets of relationships, holiness is our calling. This is hard work, demanding from us a willingness to say no to ourselves. Temptations, both internal and external, abound; and in this respect I cannot urge too strongly getting hold of Owen's work on indwelling sin and temptation. I owe John Owen a great debt for his sober, realistic and profoundly hopeful counsel. I have not yet discovered any contemporary Christian writer who knows better the human heart, the power of the indwelling Spirit, and the sufficiency of Christ's finished work on the cross. There is no other legitimate basis for a sane holiness than the liberating news of Christ crucified.

Owen reminds me of this. He knew that only the atoning death of Christ can triumph over our failures and

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<sup>45</sup> Owen, *Holy Spirit*, p.505.

weaknesses in the Christian life. ‘For even those who have this real spiritual principle of holiness, may be surprized into actual omission of duties, commission of sins, and a temporary indulgence unto corrupt affections.’<sup>46</sup> As Owen told students at Oxford, and later wrote in his 1658 study on temptation, ‘Even the best of saints, being left to themselves, will quickly appear to be less than men, to be nothing.’<sup>47</sup> Likewise, in a work on the call to mortification, namely fighting sin, he wrote: ‘... sin is always acting, always conceiving, always seducing and tempting ... there is not a day but sin foils, or is foiled; prevails or is prevailed on: and it will be so whilst we live in this world.’<sup>48</sup>

Where then is our hope? How can we prevail in this life? Listen to the pastor’s care of John Owen:

I shall freely say, this one thing of establishing the soul by faith in expectation of relief from Jesus Christ, on the account of his mercifulness as our high-priest, will be more available to the ruin of thy lust and distemper, and have a better and speedier issue, than all the rigidest means of self-maceration, that ever any of the sons of men engaged themselves into. Yea, let me add, that never any soul did, or shall perish by the power of any lust, sin or corruption, who could raise his soul by faith to an expectation of relief from Jesus Christ.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Owen, *Holy Spirit*, p.426.

<sup>47</sup> Owen, *Of Temptation* (1658), Russell: 7, p.438

<sup>48</sup> Owen, *Of Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656), Russell: 7, p.338. All further references to this work are simply, *Mortification*.

<sup>49</sup> Owen, *Mortification*, p.424.

Here is why we must preach Christ crucified. It is the only life-giving alternative to a foolish superficiality or, at the other extreme, an oppressive and fearful legalism.

In the Preface to his book, *A Passion for Holiness*, Jim Packer, with characteristic insight, commands our attention.

... the shift of Christian interest away from the pursuit of holiness to focus on fun and fulfilment, egomassage and techniques for present success, and public issues that carry no challenge to one's personal morals, is a fact. To my mind it is a sad and scandalous fact, and one that needs to be reversed.<sup>50</sup>

How can this reversal start and continue? It involves sober and realistic self-understanding. Yes, change takes place as we take seriously the call and challenge of holiness. At the same time, this reversal can only start and continue when we preach to others and to ourselves Christ crucified. Only as believers know the fullness of the gospel of Christ crucified will they be able to know and experience the essential power of holiness. This is why we must preach Christ crucified to Christ's people today.

### **3.4. *The Cross of Christ and the Believer's Assurance***

Let us conclude this study with realism along with legitimate hope. Owen superbly provides us both. We can see this as we draw together the previous points and show how each contributes to a justifiable assurance.

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<sup>50</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Passion for Holiness* (Nottingham: Crossway Books, 1992), p.9.

First, Christ died on the cross in accordance with the Father's sovereign will. The will of God assures the salvation of those for whom Christ died. There is an unbreakable link between the atonement and a believer's assurance. Owen insisted that because of God's character his work in salvation was infallible and certain.

The main foundation of that which we plead for, is the eternal purpose of God, which his own nature requireth to be absolutely immutable and irreversible. The eternal act of the will of God designing some to salvation by Christ, infallibly to be obtained, 'for the praise of the glory of his grace', is the bottom of the whole ...<sup>51</sup>

Owen never denied that some who make professions of faith apostatise, but are they, he asked, truly faithful and of the elect? While believers at times yield to indwelling sin and even have seasons of backsliding, nevertheless, they will persevere to the end. How was this? Perseverance was rooted in the work of grace. The sin of believers was not like that of non-believers.<sup>52</sup> A believer was one who had received the converting work of God, which included an infused habit of grace. Accordingly, this work of God had to produce infallibly a new creation consistent with itself. God would not abandon his work of regeneration and sanctification. Sin would not triumph. Believers belonged to Christ and were children of the Father; though they sinned, and were accountable for this sin, they never ceased to be his children.<sup>53</sup> 'Until he hath taken away his Spirit and grace, although they are rebellious

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<sup>51</sup> Owen, *Perseverance*, p.22, Preface to the Reader.

<sup>52</sup> Owen, *Perseverance*, pp.85-86.

<sup>53</sup> Owen, *Perseverance*, pp.97-98.

children, yet they are his children still.’<sup>54</sup>

Second, because the death of Christ involved not only the Father’s love and mercy to sinners but also the way of satisfied reconciliation, believers can find assurance despite their guilty conscience, the demands of the Law and Satan. Jesus is the substitute victim, whose death is our pardon. As Owen put it, ‘... his wounding and our healing, impetration, and application, his chastisement and our peace are inseparably associated.’<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, Owen saw an inextricable inter-association between Christ’s death and his present, on-going, intercession for his church. Jesus is our great high-priest.

... his intercession in heaven, is nothing but a continued oblation of himself. So that whatsoever Christ impetrated, merited or obtained, by his death and passion, must be infallibly applied unto, and bestowed upon them, for whom he intended to obtain it; or else his intercession is vain, he is not heard in the prayers of his mediatorship ...<sup>56</sup>

Third, it is the cross of Christ which assures us in our growth in holiness. The promises of the gospel flow out of our union with Christ. According to Owen, perseverance in holiness is not dependent upon the faithfulness and obedience of the saints, for this would be foolishly illogical. ‘Now what one

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<sup>54</sup> Owen, *Perseverance*, p.98.

<sup>55</sup> Owen, *Death of Death*, p.90. By impetration, Owen means, ‘the meritorious purchase of all good things made by Christ for us, with and of his Father.’ (p.87). The term, *application*, means, ‘the actual enjoyment of those good things upon our believing...’ (p.87).

<sup>56</sup> Owen, *Arminianism*, p.148.

drop of consolation can a poor, drooping, tempted soul, squeeze out of such promises, as depend wholly or solely upon any thing within themselves ...?<sup>57</sup> The answer is the complete satisfaction of Christ's substitution on the cross. Owen reminds us,

Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror. Yea, thou wilt through the good providence of God, live to see thy lust dead at thy feet.<sup>58</sup>

Sadly, we will struggle with the continued presence of what Owen called indwelling sin. A greater, clearer and more realistic perspective would help us all in these days.<sup>59</sup> The more we are engaged in biblical preaching, pastoring, apologetics and counselling, the more we will deal with the rough realities of our human fallenness. People need assurance, legitimate confidence. There are many tempting ways to provide this need; however, Owen can help us to see that in contrast to so much superficial counsel, '... but we preach Christ crucified.'

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<sup>57</sup> Owen, *Perseverance*, pp.238-39; see also pp. 235-39.

<sup>58</sup> Owen, *Mortification*, p.420.

<sup>59</sup> I attempt to provide this in my forthcoming work, *A Confident Life in an Age of Change*, to be published by Inter-Varsity Press later this year.

#### 4. **Conclusion: a message for our own times**

In his magisterial study of the cross of Christ, John Stott writes, ‘There is no greater cleavage between faith and unbelief than in their respective attitudes to the cross. Where faith sees the glory, unbelief sees only disgrace.’<sup>60</sup> Stott’s point is apt. To the cross men and women throughout the ages have come in faith and trust. Over the cross many, many others have, figuratively speaking, tripped in their disbelief and rejection of the gospel. The message of the risen Lord and Saviour, who is so because he went to the cross out of obedience to the Father, is divisive.

If it divides, nevertheless, it is essential. In the reality of our Lord’s death and resurrection, believers find true life. The cross of Christ is at the heart of our preaching, pastoring, worship, community life and total Christian experience. To be sure, Christ is no longer on the cross, he is risen. The cross of Christ is an empty cross. However, we can never rightly divorce our present blessings and future hopes from the once for all death of Jesus on a Roman cross.

This study on John Owen is a call for contemporary Christians, facing an immediate task of gospel ministry, to turn back to help from Owen. Naturally, we need to interpret Owen carefully and cautiously. He wrote into his own, specific cultural context. Things have changed since the

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<sup>60</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.40.

seventeenth century! However, there is a freshness to his counsel. It can fit the best of times and the worst of times; in other words, times like ours. Days in which we must determine to preach Christ, and him crucified into the Corinth of our contemporary society and culture.

## For Further Reading

*The Works of John Owen* are still available in the 16 Volume, William H. Goold (ed.), edition reprinted by The Banner of Truth Trust, 3 Murrayfield Road, Edinburgh EH12 6EL or P.O. Box 621, Carlisle, PA. 17013, USA.

Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh and Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1987).

Michael Green, *The Empty Cross of Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984).

Joanna and Alister McGrath, *The Dilemma of Self-Esteem — the Cross and Christian Confidence* (Wheaton, Ill, and Cambridge, England: Crossway Books, 1992).

Gavin J. McGrath, *Grace and Duty in Puritan Spirituality* (Bramcote, Notts: Grove Books, 1991).

James I. Packer, *Among God's Giants: Aspects of Puritan Christianity* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991).

John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986).

Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: the life and work of John Owen* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1971).

## ST. ANTHOLIN'S LECTURESHIP CHARITY LECTURES

In or about 1560 the parish of St. Antholin, now absorbed into what is the parish of St Mary-le-Bow in Cheapside and St Mary Alderbury, within the Cordwainer's Ward in the City of London, came into the possession of certain estates known as the "Lecturer's Estates." These were, it is believed, purchased with funds collected at or shortly after the date of the Reformation for the endowment of lectures of the Puritanical School of Divinity. The first mention of the charity was an indenture, dated 24 June 1616, made between Richard Vane of the first part, the churchwardens of the parish of St. Antholin of the second part, and certain parishioners of the said parish of the third part.

Over the centuries the funds were not always used for the stated purpose, and in the first part of the nineteenth century a scheme was drawn up which revived the lectureship, which was to consist of forty lectures to be given three times a year on the Puritan School of Divinity, the lecturer to receive one guinea per lecture. A further onerous requirement was that the lecturer had to be a beneficed Anglican, living within one mile of the Mansion House in the City of London.

Under such conditions the lectureship fell into disuse a long time ago, and it was not until 1987 that moves were put in hand with the Charity Commissioners to update the scheme. The first lecture under the new scheme was given in 1991.

**George Cassidy**

Archdeacon of London

Chairman of the St Antholin's Lectureship Charity Trustees

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