

## The Benefit of Having a Worthy Opponent

### How the Theology of Seventeenth-Century Puritans Can Be Complemented by the Nineteenth-Century German Thought Known as the Mercersburg Theology

By [Rev. Joel Kletzing](#)

#### CHAPTER EIGHT (Cont.)

##### Owen's Ecclesiology

John Owen wrote *An Inquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order and Communion of Evangelical Churches* as a response to Dr. Edward Stillingfleet, Dean of St. Paul's, who had charged the Puritan movement with schism because of their separation from the Church of England. Among other claims, Stillingfleet charged the Puritans with aiding the cause of popery by abandoning the Church of England and thus weakening its solidarity, not to mention opening the door to the possibility of yet further divisions. For Dr. Stillingfleet any separation from a church which is a true church constituted schism especially if there was agreement in core doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Nevin had distinguished between a true and a pure church. A true church Nevin defined as that which maintains a regular ministry of preaching the Word of God and administering the sacraments. Mercersburg highly regarded the pattern of the Reformers who did not wish to secede but to bring reform to a system corrupted by errors and polluted by human traditions. Nevin pointed out that the Reformers did not attempt to unchurch the entire Roman system of previous ages, but sought only to address the glaring errors of their own day.<sup>2</sup> This initial consideration of Stillingfleet's thesis appears to agree with Nevin's view of separation.

From the Puritan perspective, Owen would view the matter differently. He saw that the Church of England was employing innovations that had no warrant from Scripture. Therefore he laid the charge of schism on the Church of England for attempting to violate the consciences of worshipers and pastors as they sought to enforce uniformity based on tradition derived elsewhere than from Christ. Evidence that men like Owen arrogantly denounced the Church of England and promoted themselves as the first appearance of the true church is absent, so it

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<sup>1</sup> John Owen, *An Inquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order, and Communion of Evangelical Churches*, The Works of John Owen, vol. XV, ed. William H. Goold, rpt. (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Appel, 229.

would be unfair for Nevin to paint all persons under the Puritan umbrella with the same brush. Reference has already been made to Owen's civil treatment of Episcopalians when he was in a position of authority at Oxford.

In his opening address the reader is exposed to the context which spurred nonconformists to secede. Owen describes persecution such as infliction of physical suffering, penalties, loss of personal estate, and even loss of life. This makes Dr. Stillingfleet's accusation that Puritans were working to subvert the Church of England so as to promote a return to Rome preposterous. Nonconformists were no fans of popery.

Owen's approach to the question is to raise another question – whether it is right to prohibit a person from reforming himself according to Scripture. Framed in this light, the question is not so much centered on schism as on oppressive church practices.

In coming sections it will become clear that Nevin and Owen held differing philosophies of church history. Owen believed that the early church should be regarded as an apostolic standard which eventually degenerated into the papacy. While he would not claim the early church was flawless, he cited Hegesippus in Eusebius who spoke of the virgin purity of the church in the days of the Apostles (lib.iii.cap.29).<sup>3</sup> It was at the end of the second century, according to Owen, that deviations began to proliferate.

Stillingfleet made Owen out to say that the first church was democratic and that the people held power. Nevin would accuse New England Congregationalists of doing the same. However, in Owen's case, a firm denial of any democratic nature of early church government was made. Owen agreed that elders were given power by Jesus to rule the church. But he clarified that those elders are not to rule with force, tyranny or corporal penalties.<sup>4</sup> Stillingfleet countered with disbelief that there was such a large-scale falling away from the original institution, order and rule of the church which drew the response from Owen that if Stillingfleet was correct, then all should return to pre-Reformation Catholicism.<sup>5</sup>

Owen further went on to explain that there is nothing in Scripture which promotes a hierarchy in regional church leadership, although in the first ages of the church the presbyters of Alexandria may have chosen one of their peers to preside and called him as bishop. What develops from Owen's thought as the reader progresses further is that if the church might take liberty to organize itself into wider bodies of joint communion between congregations, those bonds should be voluntary and not forced. He believed that hierarchies as had developed in the Church of England were seedbeds of pride and ambition, just as Nevin believed that the rampant sectarianism of his day fomented the same sins. Owen

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<sup>3</sup> Owen, 194.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

explained that those entrusted with a hierarchical position, because of the difficulties of overseeing the church, are tempted to resort to force to maintain order and preserve their own power and authority and dignity rather than give of themselves so fully as to pursue holiness and Biblical literacy in behalf of those needy sheep they should be serving as shepherds, bearing with wayward sheep who are full of weaknesses.<sup>6</sup> In another place he wrote, “To suppose that the authority of Christ, the rule of the word, and the work of the ministry, are not sufficient to prescribe bounds unto separation, efficaciously affecting the consciences of believers, or that any other bounds can be assigned as obligatory unto their consciences, is what cannot be admitted.”<sup>7</sup> How Nevin would improve on that quote is by adding that private interpretation without a knowledge of church history is shortsighted and dangerous.

From Owen’s perspective, sensuality, ambition, neglect of discipline and superstition all contributed to the derelict state of the Roman Catholic Church. Under Constantine and later Christian emperors the church grew in number but lost beauty and glory due to the quality of the converts not being the same quality as those converted during eras of persecution. A reference is made to Chrysostom who at one time lamented, “What have I to do with this multitude? A few serious believers are more worth than them all.”<sup>8</sup>

But larger crowds increased the power and revenue and outer sense of dignity of those in authority. To swell the crowds even more, the ancient way of receiving new members by assessing their qualifications and the genuineness of their conversion was laid aside. Another key element of Owen’s chronicle of decline in the ancient church was that members showed excessive deference to bishops and so abdicated their responsibility for managing the affairs of the church. They willingly complied with the mistakes of the bishops instead of holding them accountable to Holy Scripture. By the time the bishop of Rome assumed the title “his holiness” apostolic simplicity and gravity had vanished.<sup>9</sup>

In the time of the apostles, bishops and elders were equal. Jerome’s writings verify this. It was at the end of the second century that evidence surfaces of one man assuming responsibility over several churches. Village or country churches often developed dependence on a larger church in the city. Eventually, a bishop was recognized as having authority over presbyters and congregations within a geographical region. This structure was adopted at the Council of Nice, having taken three to four centuries to develop after the time of the Apostles.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>7</sup> John Owen. *An Answer to Dr. Stillingfleet’s Book of the Unreasonableness of Separation: In Defence of the Vindication of Nonconformists from the Guilt of Schism*, The Works of John Owen, vol. XV, Ed., William H. Goold, rpt. (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 418-419.

<sup>8</sup> Owen, *Inquiry*, 198-199.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 202-204.

To counter the argument that the Puritans were going further than the reformers, Owen replies that the magisterial reformers themselves went further than those who attempted reform prior to their day (e.g., Wickliffe). There is no principle that forbids pressing reform further than those highly respected men who pursued what was Biblical and resisted the threats of the Roman Church of the sixteenth century. Of them Owen said,

Surely such persons never designed their own judgment and practice to give boundaries unto all reformation for evermore, or pretended that they had made so perfect a discovery of the mind of Christ, in all things belonging unto the rule and worship of the church, as that it should not only be vain but sinful to make any further inquiries about it.<sup>11</sup>

In England, the Reformation replaced the pope with the king and retained much from Catholicism in its book of worship and service.

Continuing to follow Owen's argument, schism is demonstrated by those parties in the early church who separated from a body that was Biblical in order to practice heresy, not to pursue opportunities for freedom of conscience to be Biblical when constricted by an unbiblical or extrabiblical governing structure.

What about Jesus' commands regarding keeping peace and preserving unity within His church? Consider that there is nowhere that Jesus is recorded as saying "Keep peace and unity in the church, by doing and observing whatever some men, under a pretence of being the guides of the church, shall make necessary unto that end."<sup>12</sup> According to Owen, true peace and unity can only be a reality when all agree to submit to what Jesus commands. Submission to idolatry, superstition or heresy for the sake of preserving a supposed unity is not true obedience to Christ's commands regarding unity.<sup>13</sup>

Then he notes that true peace is preserved by withdrawing from apostates with reference to the person, offices and grace of Christ. More specifically, this would apply to churches who retain a form of godliness by professing creedal truth, but live according to habitual lusts and corruption, thereby denying the power of the Gospel. Included in the list of apostate violations is deviating from the commands of Christ regarding the order, rule and worship of the church.<sup>14</sup>

From Owen's perspective, whatever argument the Church of England could use to oppose nonconformists for not sharing total communion with them, the Roman church could level the same charges against the Church of England. Owen wanted the Church of England to point out where it was given authority to impose the observance of ceremonies upon all members when those ceremonies were

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>13</sup> *Answer*, 420-421.

<sup>14</sup> *Inquiry*, 214.

not authorized by Scripture.<sup>15</sup> He struggled to grasp how one could be charged with schism for seeking freedom from beatings, fines or imprisonment for attempting to strictly adhere to Holy Scripture.<sup>16</sup> Owen recommends applying a question to the practices enforced in the Church of England that Jesus asked of the Pharisees regarding John's baptism – "Whence is it? from heaven, or from men?"<sup>17</sup>

In tracing out the institution of the church in Scripture, Owen begins in Eden and observes along the way that God was always the author of instructions for worship. He did not then hand over His ideal to humans to make alterations. He forcefully adds that any custom, tradition, or human-originated ordinance that comes between the conscience of man and the authority of God obstructs divine order and its benefits.<sup>18</sup> The church was given to Jesus by His Father (Hebrews 1:2,3; John 17:2) and because He purchased it with His blood (Acts 20:28). So it is at His disposal and not that of any mere human. Owen is not troubled if churches voluntarily join together to solemnly worship and walk jointly in obedience to God.<sup>19</sup> But that association only has limited authority, for as Owen states, "There is no *legislative power* in and over the churches as unto its form, order, and worship, left unto any of the sons of men, under any qualification whatever."<sup>20</sup> Thus no diocesan bishop in the Church of England has authority to bind men's consciences.

If it were possible to ask Owen a question, seeing he relied much on the Old Testament in developing his doctrine of the church, the question might be to inquire how Owen could justify separation when there was no precedent for forming a pure Israel or leading a separatist movement in the Old Testament. Whereas Nevin approaches the constitution of the church as a mysterious, supernatural body created by God, Owen focuses on its constitution as related to "the *outward visible profession* of subjection and obedience unto [Jesus], and the observation of His laws."<sup>21</sup> Whereas Nevin presented the concept of a true church that was not necessarily always pure, for Owen, the goal is to make the visible conform fully to the invisible. For that reason he presents membership as restricted only to those who bring glory to Christ by their profession and lifestyle in subjection to His rule. In other words, he desires to make the invisible church the same as the visible church, and it is up to local congregations to act as gatekeepers.

Owen rejects thinking that decries the whole church as lost to idolatry and false worship and apostasy and carnal lifestyles, because no one has universal scope

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 252.

of knowledge to make such a claim. He demonstrates a wariness of such sweeping generalizations, suspecting that those who make them are overly eager to condemn anyone who differs with them.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps he had in mind people who claimed that if a person was not in subjection to a diocesan bishop, salvation was barred, but his thought process distinguishes him from the later New England Puritans whom Nevin attacked for using just such arrogant rhetoric to condemn the whole world with the exception of their own homespun sect.

Owen was far harsher than Nevin in his estimation of the Medieval church. Nevin was apt to philosophically defend the Medieval church as a true church in need of reform, but Nevin never tasted persecution as so many of the Puritans had either experienced or witnessed. In that sense, Nevin's peaceful existence afforded him a philosophical luxury in his consideration of the Roman system that Owen did not have due to matters of practical concern. It is unfathomable for Owen, for instance, that in the tenth century when the bishops of Rome "were monsters for ignorance, lust, pride, and luxury" that they could have been the true church.<sup>23</sup> Both Owen and Nevin confronted abuse in the church – Owen directing his attention to those who abused by attempting to force unity and Nevin dealing with those who abused from a platform of strife and division and endless separations.

Here is how Owen defined the visible church:

The visible church-state which Christ hath instituted under the New Testament consists in an especial society or congregation of professed believers, joined together according unto his mind, with their officers, guides, or rulers, whom he hath appointed, which do or may meet together for the celebration of all the ordinances of divine worship, the professing and authoritatively proposing the doctrine of the gospel, with the exercise of the discipline prescribed by himself, unto their own mutual edification, with the glory of Christ, in the preservation and propagation of his kingdom in this world.<sup>24</sup>

After reading Nevin, what will appear to be missing from that definition is an emphasis on the life of Christ organically constituting a new humanity. Owen focuses more on the mind of God and an almost voluntary human reaction in contrast to Nevin's organic outworking of the life of Christ which mystically unites all believers into a single body. Owen sees the material cause of the church to be visible believers and the formal cause the voluntary coalescing into a congregation according to the mind of Christ which produces a local communion acting in obedience to Christ and for mutual edification by means of preaching, participation in the sacraments, discipline, holy living before the world in subjection to Christ, having officers, with each congregation possessing "all the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 262.

privileges, promises, and power that Christ doth give and grant unto the church in this world.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, each such gathered group is complete and lacking nothing if not officially tied to a larger denomination.

When Nevin brought his philosophical lens to gaze on the church, he saw in it the very life of Christ manifesting itself through the organic union of the Head and members of the Body. Owen deals with the church in more practical terms, believing that God appointed its existence so that the souls and consciences of believers could be subjected to His authority by observing His commands, so that Gospel ordinances and worship could be engaged jointly, and for the preservation of discipline.<sup>26</sup> To combine Nevin and Owen, Owen’s very practical descriptions of the usefulness of the church are given tremendous weight, dignity and footing when considered in conjunction with Nevin’s emphasis on the church being a supernatural manifestation of the very life of Christ. This would lead participants to seek Christ within it and lay a broader foundation for worship than exists when speaking only in practical terms of usefulness for the gathering of Christ’s people. Owen stresses more the development of spirituality as a result of being acted on by the external Word of God more than the bubbling up of a shared life through internal mystical union with Christ which is a constant refrain in Nevin’s writings. In reality, neither can exist properly without the other. Whereas Owen emphasizes Christ’s presence with and over the church, Nevin mystically describes the church as the actual Body of Christ.

Owen goes on to present four ends as to why Christ instituted discipline in His church. First, it is to preserve the doctrine of the Gospel in purity and Gospel obedience in its integrity. To use the sword of civil authority to implement discipline, in Owen’s eyes, is an admission that the means Christ has provided are insufficient, for He never authorized such a partnership or use of force. Proper discipline consists of exhortations, admonitions, reproof and finally total rejection.

Second, discipline is to preserve love among disciples by properly settling offences. Love cannot thrive without mutual exhortations and admonitions.

Third, discipline represents Christ’s own love through enacting the authority He vested in the church. A church lacking practice of discipline may not be fully anti-Christian but can be injurious to its members and dishonoring to Christ. In instances where it is manipulated by tricks of manipulated law and appeal to civil courts it becomes a scandalous representation of Christ’s love. For this reason it must be carefully engaged with meekness, patience, gentleness and compassion.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 262-263.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 263-265.

Fourth, Owen refers to Tertullian who recognized excommunication as providing for the church a picture of future judgment.<sup>27</sup>

Only congregational and not diocesan, papal, patriarchal, metropolitanical or national churches are fit to carry out this discipline. It is not necessary even to involve a presbytery in matters of discipline.<sup>28</sup> All the original New Testament churches who were tasked with the exercise of discipline were congregational and did not answer to a hierarchical entity besides Christ. Owen demands, "If therefore, any other church-state be supposed, we may well require that its name, nature, use, power, and bounds be some or all of them declared in the Scriptures."<sup>29</sup> He points out that for the first two hundred years after Christ there is no "mention of any other organical, visibly-professing church, but that only which is parochial or congregational."<sup>30</sup> All of the early congregations were equal with none ruling over another. Sharing one Spirit, hope of their calling, Lord, faith, baptism, etc., all would have been obliged to work toward each other's good and edification and to help each other through prayer, advice, counsel, exhortation, consolation and supplies for the poor so as to preserve unity and communion, joining together against anything opposed to the rule of Christ.<sup>31</sup>

What ruined this, he surmises, was pride and ambition along with a desire for pre-eminence. Certain churches may have become elevated in reputation because an apostle made his residence there for a time. Revelation chapters two and three demonstrate that churches could quickly fall away from proper order and discipline. Numerous forces could act on a congregation to derail it from its humble fulfilment of its mission for Christ's glory. If a city rose to prominence, the church within it might have seemed more prestigious, creating a hierarchy which elevated perhaps a church in Jerusalem or Antioch above a poorer more obscure congregation in a less developed location. It would not take a large step for more prominent congregations to usurp authority. By the time of the Council of Nice it appeared that a few major churches had begun to divide the Christian world into jurisdictions. Rome rose to great prominence, so the congregation there asserted its own sense of importance.<sup>32</sup>

Next, a system of government reflecting that of Roman civil government took shape.<sup>33</sup> Owen then goes on to cite examples of earlier fraternal letters where one congregation cared for another but without asserting a hierarchical system of rule over each other. Those letters were addressed to congregations and sent by congregations and not addressed to a regional bishop or originating from a regional bishop. Evidence cannot be found among the first sources for a

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 265-267.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 273-274.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 280.



developed structure beyond particular congregations meeting weekly on Sunday having elders and deacons. Tertullian references at the end of the second century a congregation covenanting together to live and walk in the discipline of Christ. It functioned autonomously including the exercise of discipline. Missing were mentions of diocesan bishops, archbishops, national churches or a universal structure for governing all churches by one person or body.<sup>34</sup> It was in the fourth century that a system of appointing a different class of bishops came into being, and power was yielded to bishops in large cities.<sup>35</sup>

Owen launches into a series of arguments that congregational churches alone are “suited unto the ends of Christ in the institution of his church.”<sup>36</sup> The intense love practiced in the first century church is properly developed in particular congregations. His critics accused the congregational system of fostering division and lovelessness instead. Also included in his reasoning was the appropriateness of particular churches as the agents who serve as “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15) or the “principal outward means to support, preserve, publish, declare, and propagate the doctrine or truth of the gospel.” Plus, the same system is well suited to propagating the gospel in communities.<sup>37</sup> Nowhere can it be found in Scripture that the church is to rely on corporal punishment which belongs to civil magistrates in order to maintain its own order. While the civil government has no authority to govern ecclesiastical matters, neither should the church-state attempt to impeach kings. Both church and civil government should see themselves as Christ’s ministers and submit to His commands. Thus it would be appropriate for all church members to submit to civil government.<sup>38</sup> He did qualify this separation of powers by acknowledging that civil government has jurisdiction over the affairs of a church if that congregation is responsible for disturbing the peace with a fight, if it erects idolatrous monuments or tolerates seditious individuals who hide behind religion but whose goal is actually the subversion of civil government and national welfare.<sup>39</sup>

Emphatically Owen declared that “there is no church order, state, or church form of divine institution, that doth any way impede, take away, or overthrow that liberty, power, and order of particular congregation.”<sup>40</sup> Whatever men may invent regarding order that does not threaten the liberty and power of particular congregations is not of concern to Owen.<sup>41</sup> To be clear, particular congregations are not dependent on a higher governing body to give them authority. Attempting to exercise a freedom to develop a useful hierarchy (especially through the help of a civil magistrate) risks attempting to improve on what Jesus established.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 295, 297-298.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 300-301.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 306-308.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 309-312.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 313-314.

Whereas Nevin would later argue that the congregational way has produced endless divisions, Owen, holding to congregationalism as the original pattern of the church, alleges that it is the fault of well-intentioned attempts to improve on Christ's original model which has led to endless contentions.<sup>42</sup>

All believers, Owen held, are duty bound to join themselves with a particular church to the end that God is glorified and they themselves are edified. A church should be chosen that most closely aligns with the revealed mind of God. Churches must not accept members who do not profess Christ. The early church retained some as catechumens for extended periods of time if they were not deemed fit to be admitted as members because of lack of understanding of Christ and the Gospel or a lifestyle which contradicts a valid profession of faith.<sup>43</sup> A good member constantly fixes his mind on the enjoyment of God as his chief good and purpose. The number of such sincere and focused persons is small, so congregations should not necessarily be reproached for being of small size.<sup>44</sup>

Four visible marks of a true church are identified in this volume as ministerial preaching, administration of the sacraments, exercise of evangelical discipline and a public testimony against the devil and the world, fighting hard against invading corruption. It is not enough to be born on English soil to gain entrance into the church.<sup>45</sup> The church is not to be composed by some automatic process that could theoretically function apart from visible profession of faith. Any searching for an effusion of the Spirit's gifts and graces that downplays the ordinances handed down from Christ of preaching and the sacraments reduces religion to barbarism.<sup>46</sup>

With a host of Scriptures listed, Owen declares that "out of the church there is no salvation."<sup>47</sup> No church of any denomination can solely lay claim to itself alone being the true church. That would be Donatism. When he wrote this, he had in mind those who claimed that due to their documented succession of diocesan bishops they alone were the true church. In Nevin's writings he would use very similar arguments with self-assured Congregationalists in mind. What is worthy of note here is that on this crucial point, Owen and Nevin agreed.

In order to argue for continuity between the Medieval Roman church and the post-Reformation Protestant church, Nevin and Schaff would repeatedly emphasize Matthew 28:20 where Jesus promised to be with His church until the end of the age. To them it did not make sense that the New England Congregationalists as well as many sects that existed alongside them would claim that there was over a thousand years of church history (the Middle Ages)

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 319-321.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 330.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 323.

where the entire church was apostate. How could Christ promise to be present and yet seem to not be governing for a thousand years?

Owen also chose to emphasize that verse, but he qualified it so that it applied not to the church in general as an institution, but to those specifically who observe His commands.<sup>48</sup> Similar to later Mercersburg, Owen says that according to this verse there has been no abatement in the efficacy of the divine institution. That efficacy depends on the covenant of God which is the foundation for all offices, powers, privileges and duties belonging to the church-state which all declare the grace of God in His covenant as well as the duties required of those in covenant with God. Anything man adds to the original order which is not communicating the grace of the covenant or conducting participants to perform covenant duties is not true and should not be instituted.<sup>49</sup> The ordinances do not fail to continue because they are corrupted, abused or defiled because to claim that they could be so invalidated would be to concede that their validity is dependent on the will of man. Owen held that the actions of wicked leaders cannot overthrow the kingdom beyond all possibility of restoration.<sup>50</sup> This view bears some resemblance to the Mercersburg view that would develop, maintaining that a church can be a true church even if it is not pure. Without going so far as to deem the Church of England no church at all Owen wrote, "it is our duty to heal even Babylon itself, by a reduction of all things unto their first institution, if it would be healed, Jeremiah li.9; and if not, we are to forsake her and reform ourselves, Revelation xviii.4."<sup>51</sup> Owen's congregational principle can not be related in full to the Reformers who were forced to separate but did not attempt to reestablish an original congregational system of order as a step toward seeking reform in the established church.

After reinforcing once again that Christ promised the church and her ordinances of worship would continue to the end of the age (Matthew 16:18; Revelation 1:3; Matthew 28:19-20; Ephesians 4:13; 1 Corinthians 11:26), Owen counselled that for anyone who plainly knows a church is corrupted and that its worship is depraved "it is a damnable sin to join with them or not to separate from them, Revelation xviii.4."<sup>52</sup> Owen's focus then qualifies or limits the embrace of the label church more so than Nevin who would focus more on the entire institution's organic union with Christ and role as His Body.

Whereas Nevin will assume that the development of the church with its hierarchical structure was under the direction of Christ, Owen's limiting boundaries were summed up when he said, "this kingdom of Christ in the world, so far as it is external and visible, consists in the laws he hath given, the institutions he hath appointed, the rule or polity he hath prescribed, with the due

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 329.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 333.

observance of them.”<sup>53</sup> Christ will always maintain both the invisible, genuine church of elect believers and the visible kingdom of those who profess and promise subjection to His law/Word.

To what type of congregation should a disciple of Jesus join himself/herself? Avoid those who have corrupted a fundamental article of faith,<sup>54</sup> such as a Socinian church or one which has demanded of its members requirements in worship which show additions or subtractions from the directions Christ gave. Owen recognized that there will be occasional circumstances calling for a decision regarding polity which are not specifically addressed in Scripture. These must be addressed according to the light of nature and more general principles found in the Bible.<sup>55</sup>

Another characteristic of a church that would be off limits to believers would be one that it is void of discipline or order, such as those who do not ordain officers or ministers according to the rule of Christ. Candidates for ordination must be examined as to whether they possess the necessary spiritual gifts and are otherwise qualified by their lifestyles. The people must be equipped to select their own pastors who meet Biblical qualifications. A congregation that practices no discipline of its members is prejudiced against their edification.<sup>56</sup> Most church members, Owen observed, would rather join with Cain who asked, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” than to follow the apostle who commanded, “Exhort one another daily, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”<sup>57</sup>

As with all systems of polity, Congregationalism is subject to abuse and corruption. Some see the door to such corruption as that of entrusting too much authority or freedom of discernment to laypersons to determine which setting or type of church is best. Would such a reliance on each person’s opinion not yield endless divisions?

Owen counters that if men are not permitted to make such judgments, over the course of time true religion will be destroyed. His reasoning is strengthened if the reader recalls the state of the sixteenth-century Roman church and its refusal to allow any liberty to reason on the part of its members. Secondly, Owen points out that those who would deny professing Christians such liberty to judge and to join a pure church preserve for themselves that very right as they argue that folks should belong to one church and not another.<sup>58</sup> In other words, Owen was saying that his opponents want to make judgments about the rightness of their own polity but refuse that right to separatists.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 333-334.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 336-338.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 342.

In another of his works Owen appealed to the pattern of the Reformers, noting on the matter of equipping church members to think and choose for themselves, “That Christian people were not tied up unto blind obedience unto church-guides, but were not only at liberty, but also obliged to judge for themselves as unto all things that they were to believe and practice in religion and the worship of God.”<sup>59</sup>

The obvious question with which many grappled in Owen’s day was whether all Protestants in England were bound to remain in the Church of England, subject to all its rules and discipline, and whether a charge of schism was valid for those who chose otherwise. Refusal to submit to the Church of England could result in action from the civil authorities, namely confiscating goods, depriving subjects of liberty and even of life. The guidance Owen offered was that Jesus certainly has commanded love, union, peace and order over against schism, but He has not left it to men to invent and appoint a new kind of union and order. Human laws must not be enforced as binding on man’s conscience – such as forcing all to assent and consent to the use of the Book of Common Prayer in full, to accept all liturgies and to honor all religious holidays endorsed in the Church of England. The Roman church had attempted to rule men’s consciences by force, and their goal was not achieved. Owen promoted freedom for each congregation to exercise liberty to regulate the outward circumstances of worship and order as it deems best for its own edification.<sup>60</sup>

A further defense of those who were choosing not to continue in communion with parochial assemblies within the Church of England was presented. Revelation two and three indicate that of churches who stand in need of reformation and who do not submit to reform, Christ threatens to leave them. If Christ withdraws His presence, it is the duty of church members to follow suit. “It is safer leaving of any church whatever than of Jesus Christ.”<sup>61</sup> The Church of England stood in need of reform because the members in general were degenerate. Atheistical opinions abounded; profane scoffers of true Christian piety filled the rolls; ignorance of the Gospel and of crucial doctrines was rampant; gross immorality, neglect of private holy duties; pride, vanity, covetousness and profane speech could all be added to the list. It was conceded that finding a hypocrite in a church would not earn for that body the label of a false church, but if the hypocrites’ behavior was well known and not dealt with by the church, then the church is in need of reform.<sup>62</sup> In contrast to such a prevailing atmosphere in the Church of England in Owen’s day, the early church would not even admit a Roman emperor to membership unless he first confessed his sins and assumed the role of a penitent (Eusebius lib.vi.cap.33).<sup>63</sup> For all the charges the Puritans would face that they were ruining the peace of the church by their nonconformity and

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<sup>59</sup> Answer, 402.

<sup>60</sup> *Inquiry*, 346.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 351-352.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

separation, Owen made clear that if separation was caused by the unrighteous character of a church, then the Puritan movement was actually working in the interest of unity in pursuing purity in congregational life because without personal reform all attempt at unity would fail.<sup>64</sup>

Owen was also critical of the Church of England's reliance on only the Thirty-Nine Articles, claiming they were not detailed enough to combat errors such as Socinianism and Arminianism. They did not provide a sufficient platform from which to conduct the true edification of souls. But he was not one to insist on strict compliance to standards of uniformity on every detail of life. He acknowledged liberty should be employed in matters pertaining to the differences of gifts received from Christ, regarding spiritual wisdom given to pastors for their specific context including a variety of church administrations (provided they all produce edification), different expositions of Scripture as long as the analogy of faith is kept (Romans 12:6), and differing apprehensions of doctrines which do not have immediate bearing on the practice or comfort of believers. He wisely went on record attesting that the Scriptures possess a depth that cannot be totally grasped by any one church in any single context.<sup>65</sup>

The charge of schism "is a sin against Christian love."<sup>66</sup> Therefore it cannot be made against those who separate due to human inventions imposed as if they had been instituted by Christ. Writes Owen,

Wherefore, to allow church-rulers, or such as pretend to be, a liberty and power to appoint a rule of communion, -- comprising institutions and commands of sundry things to be constantly observed in the whole worship and discipline of the church, not warranted in themselves by divine authority, -- and then to charge believers abiding firm in the doctrines of the faith, with schism, for a non-compliance with such commands and appointments, is that which neither in the Scripture nor in primitive antiquity, hath either instance, example, precedent, rumour, or report, to give countenance unto it.<sup>67</sup>

Further,

To erect new kinds of churches; to introduce into them new orders, new rules, rites and ceremonies; to impose their observation on all churches and all members of them; and to charge their dissent with the guilt of schism; that schism which is prohibited and condemned in the Scripture, -- hath much of an assumed authority and severity in it, nothing of countenance from the Scripture or primitive antiquity.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Answer*, 407.

<sup>65</sup> *Inquiry*, 355-357.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 367-368.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

Mercersburg will argue that tradition which grows up over centuries, if it is in submission to Scripture, is a part of Christ's continuous presence shaping the church. But Nevin and Schaff would not push that point to the extent that they would move the church back toward Rome with the assumption that everything that had grown to be a part of that body over centuries was acceptable. The charges of schism they would assign to their contemporaries were not to be placed on people of the same caliber as Owen. Nor were they in a society that felt the grip of persecution from the established church. They would confront separatists who saw themselves as a part of a God-driven repriminization of the church or a return to the purity of the early church, insisting that their own way was the only narrow portal of truth available on the planet and that all outside their little band are false. Owen was different than Nevin's targeted opponents. Note Owen's position as follows:

I am not so vain as at this time to expect the reduction of Christian religion unto its primitive power, purity, and simplicity; nor do I reflect blame on them who walk conscientiously in such a church state and order as they approve of, or suppose it the best they can attain unto; only I think it lawful for all Christ's disciples at all times to yield obedience unto all his commands, and to abstain from being servants of men in what he hath not enjoined.<sup>69</sup>

In another work in which Owen responds further to accusations of schism from Dr. Stillingfleet, Owen delineates sufficient unity, namely that it consists in communion in faith and love and keeping the same sacraments. In other words, rather than relying on external hierarchical structure to unify, sharing doctrine and conviction and practice forms stronger and true unity. Differences in rites and rules of order should be acknowledged, and congregations should be free to join together with others who are like-minded who hold to the same confession of faith and similar style of worship, and who will at the same time refrain from condemning those who differ as if they were not valid churches at all, even occasionally extending expressions of love toward those with whom there are differences.<sup>70</sup>

Owen was criticized as inconsistent because he would share occasional fellowship with parochial churches but refused to participate in parochial assemblies. He responded, "It may also be lawful to do a thing, with some respects and limitations, at some times, which it may not be lawful to do absolutely and always."<sup>71</sup> He sought to get along, to tolerate Christian brothers with whom he differed, and he wished for the Anglican church to do the same. The charge of schism should be reserved for those who reject main points of orthodox theology, not those who differ on matters of conformity to man-designed

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>70</sup> *Answer*, 377.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 378.

rites.<sup>72</sup> It appeared plain to Owen that the Church of England was the culprit in causing strife and division.

To show that Owen's heart was not schismatic by nature, his answer to Dr. Stillingfleet included direction that churches should be taught to emphasize the general interest they share with believers from varying traditions so that they can unite together against the kingdom of Satan and Antichrist rather than engaging in animosity toward each other over matters of lesser importance.<sup>73</sup> If, when one reads Nevin, it seems that virtually every Congregationalist is divisive and sectarian, Owen shows that there is a way to avoid such carnal and unchurchly ways and be a Congregationalist.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 395-396.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 407.