

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 TEN (cont.)

The Nature, Power, Deceit and Prevalency of the Reminders of Indwelling Sin in Believers by John Owen

This final work under consideration by John Owen is based on Romans 7:21 – “I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me.” Law here refers to power or efficacy. Instead of a directive rule it here is “an operative effective principle.”¹ Even though sin’s rule is broken, its strength is impaired, and its root mortified, it retains great force and efficacy. Those who are unaware of the power of this indwelling sin will fall blindly under its dominion.²

In the believer, grace reigns sovereignly in the soul and engages in conflict with the law of sin. That principle of grace is “the law of the Spirit of life” (Romans 8:2). At the fall, the law of God was evicted from Adam as far as having rule or dominion in him. But sparks remain in the natural man (Romans 2:14-15). Later, God renewed that law through the Ten Commandments, but they were externally proposed to men without power to perform in the will the things required in that law. An inward, real principle which God establishes is called for in the heart (Jeremiah 31:31-33) in order to defeat the usurping law of sin which seeks to govern a person’s heart.³

Consider the predicament thus created which Owen describes when he says that because of indwelling sin men “find not that there is darkness and folly in their minds because they are darkness itself, and darkness will discover nothing.” Neither can deadness in the heart readily be discerned because the deadness itself does not permit such consciousness. Owen further assesses the situation with these words, “They are at peace with their lusts by being in bondage unto them.”⁴

¹ John Owen, “The Nature, Power, Deceit and Prevalency of the Reminders of Indwelling Sin in Believers,” *Overcoming Sin & Temptation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 233-234.

² *Ibid.*, 235.

³ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

Hearing the Bible's description of the true human state calls us to humiliation, self-abasement, intense prayer, diligent watchfulness, an unrelenting quest for spiritual wisdom, and a desperate seeking of grace and help from the Holy Spirit. The danger is great, and few respond with appropriate intensity. The heart should be God's throne, and it has given way to a dangerous tyrant's rule instead. Thus Ecclesiastes 9:3 says that "Madness is in the heart of men while they live," and that is why out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders and many other things Jesus listed in Matthew 15. External temptations are the occasion for unleashing what is already stored up in the heart.⁵

Heart here is taken to refer to the entire soul and its faculties, including mind, will, affections and conscience. In its natural state it is deceitful and overrun with contradictions. If the mind discovers good, the will rejects it, or if the will chooses good, the affections refuse to delight in it. Affections assume supremacy in the entire process. God alone can sort out the deceits and entanglements in the heart, for He knows it fully.⁶

As for the nature of indwelling sin, it is sheer enmity against God. It is incapable of a peace settlement with Him. The only solution is for that indwelling sin to be destroyed. It possesses an insatiable appetite and so cannot be appeased. It insists on throwing off God's yoke and breaking dependence on the Creator.⁷

A key to freeing the mind from the influence of indwelling sin is to learn the beauty and excellence of spiritual things, more specifically, the beauty of holiness and not just physical props some have added to public worship. Owen goes so far as to say that a dependence on outward images when learning the beauty of spiritual things weakens the soul's aversion to sin.⁸

Sin awakens with lusting which stirs up inordinate images in the mind and inordinate desires in the appetite and affections, with the intention of stirring the will to act. It rebels against grace and brings a full assault against the soul in order to gain greater control over it. In doing so, it labors to draw the believer away from prayer and meditation. It diverts the mind so that even in the fulfillment of duties the subject fails to commune with God, thus turning him into a hypocrite or empty formalist.⁹ When the soul is willing to be tempted or courted by sin, it has lost its conjugal affections toward Christ.¹⁰

⁵ Ibid., 249-250.

⁶ Ibid., 251-256.

⁷ Ibid., 257-258, 260.

⁸ Ibid., 269-270.

⁹ Ibid., 276-277, 307, 320.

¹⁰ Ibid., 328.

A disciple of Christ should be deliberate about fixing affections on spiritual things such as Christ's cross. In this way sin will lose its desirableness.¹¹ Even if the will gives way to sin, that consent is not total or full in the believer because grace retains dominion, not sin.¹² The will pursues what it perceives as good, relying on the understanding which can be deceived and the affections which can become entangled. So, sin is conceived more easily where there is a lack of knowledge of God's will (Hosea 4:6). Those who are ignorant of the mind of God rush to comply with sinful impulses.¹³ If sin is conceived, it will come to fruition unless God providentially moves to cut off the power it requires or to interrupt the will.¹⁴ Over numerous pages Owen develops the idea that God acts to prevent evil in many contexts by various means in both the regenerate and unregenerate according to His purpose.

Having much knowledge of God alone will not prevent sin, for Noah and David knew much of God and His grace and still committed notorious sins.¹⁵ They had received much mercy which obligated them to serious and diligent watchfulness. These instances remind the reader of the dangerous strength of sin and that only the Holy Spirit can overcome it. Owen diagnoses the problem as being that of hidden inward decay, of love for God grown cold, normally marked by a diminishing delight in worship and the ordinances God has established as well as diminished delight in His Word.¹⁶

God's Word and the ordinances of the church administered by the officers God has appointed are given by God to prevent spiritual decay and to press the child of God toward perfection.¹⁷ Otherwise indwelling sin would promote carnal lusts to dominate a person's convictions and work to entangle the soul in the affairs of the world.¹⁸

Humans were made "to give glory to God by rational and moral obedience, and so to obtain a reward in the enjoyment of him."¹⁹ Rational here refers to choosing based on reason, and the term moral deals with what is regulated by law not derived from human reason. In other words, humans were designed to learn both the mind and will of God and to conform to it, loving God and enjoying Him as the chief good. Indwelling sin violently opposes this design and acts so strongly it can reduce men to act worse than animals, acting to destroy even their own nature, such as when one kills his own children, engages in sodomy, incest, perjury, revenge, etc.²⁰

¹¹ Ibid., 331-332.

¹² Ibid., 334.

¹³ Ibid., 335-336, 340.

¹⁴ Ibid., 342-343.

¹⁵ Ibid., 364.

¹⁶ Ibid., 366-368.

¹⁷ Ibid., 369.

¹⁸ Ibid., 380.

¹⁹ Ibid., 389.

²⁰ Ibid., 389-391.

The Gospel is the most reasonable and profitable choice available to humans, but indwelling sin pushes a deadly obstruction in front of those presented with saving truth and loving invitation. It musters blindness of the mind, stubbornness of the will and sensuality entangling the affections, all in an effort to ensure souls perish.²¹ It flourishes by staying concealed until it is discovered by the law. Many live oblivious to the power of this law within them unless the law exposes the filth and guilt of indwelling sin. Thus, after the law brings light, the sinner is left without excuse. But by law alone indwelling sin does not lose its power. That power is broken only by grace (Romans 6:14). No amount of human resolutions respecting the law can free a person from sin's power. Self-effort only fosters self-righteousness and superstition. The law only has power to enrage indwelling sin.²²

Grace has the ability to change a believer's very nature and inward operating principles. Humans can sometimes alter outward behavior for a time, but they cannot transform their inner constitution.²³

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²¹ Ibid., 392-393.

²² Ibid., 398-401, 404, 406-407.

²³ Ibid., 406.