

# **The Puritan Hermeneutics of John Owen: A Recommendation**

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## **I. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Does a Puritan hermeneutic have anything to teach the church today? Has our hermeneutic advanced so far beyond the Puritans' that the study of their principles of interpretation would be a waste of time? This essay will seek to answer these questions by examining the hermeneutic of the premier Puritan theologian, John Owen. We will begin our study by setting Owen in his historical context. We will also take note of his hermeneutical context with a brief examination of the Reformed and Puritan doctrine of Scripture and principles of interpretation. Finally, we will examine Owen's doctrine of Scripture and his principles of interpretation, and conclude with some application.

## **II. Owen's Life**

John Owen was born in Stadham (now Stadhampton), near Oxford, in the year 1616. He was the son of the Puritan vicar, Reverend Mr. Henry Owen. In the parsonage Owen was taught to pray; to read the Bible, and to obey the commandments. Moreover, from his earliest years Owen was exposed to the Puritan-Calvinistic teaching of the Scriptures. Peter Toon writes:

We may thus perhaps attribute to the influence of his father the genesis of many of Owen's later emphases, characteristics and opinions. His insistence that Holy Scripture is the only authority for faith, worship and conduct, his Calvinist theology, his opposition to ceremonial in worship, his understanding of the pastoral office, his deep conviction of God's providential dealings with the British people and his personal search for communion and fellowship with God through Christ may all have had their origin in the home and church at Stadham.<sup>2</sup>

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1. I would like to thank Dr. Timothy L. Dyck for reading over this paper and for offering some helpful suggestions.

2. Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1971), 3. In later years Owen wrote about his father and stated that he was "a Nonconformist all his days, and a painful labourer in the vineyard of the Lord" (*The Works of John Owen* [24 vols.; ed. W. H. Goold; Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850–55], 13:224).

Owen began his university studies at the age of twelve in Queen's College, Oxford, and graduated with his BA four years later in June 1632.<sup>3</sup> These studies included the classical education of grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy. Three years later he received his MA, and then began a seven-year course for the BD degree. Unfortunately, because of the rise of the Laudian High church party and his Puritan convictions, he left the University, and in 1637 became chaplain and tutor to the household of Sir Robert Dormer near Stadham.<sup>4</sup> Shortly afterwards he became chaplain for the home of John, Lord Lovelace, who "was a firm Protestant and had no special love for Archbishop Laud and his religion."<sup>5</sup> When the first civil war broke out in 1642 Owen left his chaplaincy.<sup>6</sup> It was at this time that he experienced the assurance of salvation; while hearing a sermon by an unknown preacher at Aldermanbury Chapel in London, he came to experience the love of God shed abroad in his heart and became assured of his own salvation.<sup>7</sup> It was in this year also that he published his first work, *A Display of Arminianism*, which was a powerful Calvinistic polemic against Arminianism. A short time later he took his first pastorate at Fordham in Essex where he served for three years; then in 1646 he became pastor of the distinguished pulpit of St. Peter's in Coggeshall.<sup>8</sup> It was during his pastorate at St. Peter's that he came to espouse a Congregationalist ecclesiology. In the following years he preached to Parliament and came in contact with the leaders of the New Model Army and, in particular, with Oliver Cromwell. Through this contact he became the official preacher in Whitehall (1650), the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford (1651), and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford (1652). It was during these years that he wrote some important theological works. These works include the strongly Calvinistic treatise, *Of the Death of Death*, which used Aristotelian logic and Scripture to defend the doctrine of limited atonement, as well as *The Dissertation on Divine Justice* (1653), *The Doctrine of the Saints Perseverance* (1654), *Vindiciae Evangelicae* (1655), and *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656). In 1657 Owen fell out of favor with Cromwell and left Oxford. He continued his appointment at Christ's Church until 1660. During those three years

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3. In order to graduate he had to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles.

4. William Orme writes: "The same year, 1637, that produced Hampden's resistance of illegal taxation, drove Owen from Oxford, in consequence of the ecclesiastical tyranny of Laud. Among the other situations, which that ambitious churchman had monopolized, was that of chancellor of Oxford. In virtue of his office, he caused a new body of statutes to be drawn up for the university; in the preface to which he distinctly intimated that he considered the days of Mary better than those of Edward; and enjoined obedience to certain superstitious rites on the members of the university, on pain of being expelled" (*Memoirs of The Life, Writings and Religious Connexion of John Owen, D.D.* [London: Printed for Richard Baynes, 1826], 12–13).

5. Toon, *God's Statesman*, 11.

6. He left because Lovelace was a Royalist.

7. Owen, *Works*, 9:606–9.

8. This was the pulpit of the Westminster Assembly divine Obadiah Sedgwick.

Owen was involved in the writing of the *Savoy Declaration* and several more books. In particular, three of them dealt with the subject of the Scriptures: *Pro Sacris Scripturis*

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*Exercitationes adversus Fanaticos* (1658), *Of the Divine Original...of the Scriptures* (1659), and *A Vindication of the Hebrew and Greek Texts* (1659). The latter one was written in response to Brian Walton's book entitled *Biblia Polyglotta* (1659), which Owen believed would dangerously expose the church to Popery through the Vulgate. *Of the Divine Original* was written to prove that the Bible in itself contains satisfactory evidence of its divine source. And *Pro Sacris*, an important book for our study, was written in response to the Quakers and their doctrine of the Inner Light.

After the Restoration in 1660 Owen left Christ's Church and retired to his home in Stadharn where he ministered to a gathered congregation. During the next twenty-three years until his death Owen served the Church as pastor and writer. Although a Dissenter, he was able to publish and carry out his pastoral ministry because of his political connections established during the Interregnum.<sup>9</sup> In 1673 his London church and that of Joseph Caryl joined together, with Owen as the pastor. It was during these Restoration years that most of his works were written. Such important theological and pastoral treatises as *The Nature, Power, Deceit and Prevalency of Indwelling Sin* (1667), *Exercitations on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1668–1684), *A Discourse on the Holy Spirit* (1674), *The Doctrine of Justification of Faith* (1677), *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually-minded* (1681), *A Discourse of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer* (1682), *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (1684), and *The True Nature of a Gospel Church and Its Government* (1689). Of all these works the most important for this essay is his first treatise on the Holy Spirit entitled *Pneumatologia or, A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*. It is in this non-polemical work that he clearly lays out his views on the interpretation of the Scriptures in Book VI, Part II, entitled "Causes, Ways and Means of Understanding the Mind of God."

Owen died on August 24th 1683, in his 67th year at Ealing and, was buried in Bunhill Fields. His tombstone reads, among other things:

In Divinity, practical, polemical, and casuistical, he excelled others, and was in all equal to himself. The Arminian, Socinian, and Popish errors, those Hydras, whose contaminated breath, and deadly poison infested the church, he with more than Herculean labour, repulsed, vanquished, and destroyed. The whole economy of redeeming grace, revealed and applied by the Holy Spirit, he deeply investigated and communicated to others, having first felt its divine energy, according to its draught in the Holy Scriptures, transfused into his bosom.<sup>10</sup>

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9. These probably include the Earl of Orrery, the Earl of Anglesea, the Lord Willoughby of Parham, the Lord Wharton, the Lord Berkley, and Sir John Trevor. An early biographer, John Asty, comments, "Even King Charles and the Duke of York paid a particular respect to him" (Quoted in Toon, *God's Statesman*, 125).

10. Quoted in *ibid.*, 183. This is a translation from the Latin.

In 1684 his extensive library was sold by public auction. It contained 1,418 Latin treatises, 32 bound volumes of Greek and Latin manuscripts, and 1,454 English books. Toon says Owen's library "included works by every major theological and

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classical author as well as books on history, travel and geography."<sup>11</sup> From this we can assume that he was well read in both Puritan and Reformed theology.

In conclusion to this brief study of Owen's life, we see that he was raised under Puritanism, read Puritan works, pastored Puritan churches, was surrounded by Puritan friends,<sup>12</sup> and imbibed Puritan theology and practice as reflected in his writings. There is little doubt that John Owen was a Puritan; in fact, by many he is considered "the theologian of the Puritan movement."<sup>13</sup> Now we will see what this Puritan par excellence believed about the Scriptures and their interpretation. But before we do we will examine Owen's hermeneutical context.

### III. Owen's Hermeneutical Context

What was the Reformed and Puritan doctrine of Scripture and understanding of hermeneutic in the seventeenth century? The Reformed doctrine of Scripture is outlined in Heinrich Heppe's *Reformed Dogmatics*.<sup>14</sup> From their numerous writings he shows that Reformed dogmatists taught that: the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments were God's written Word itself;<sup>15</sup> these books came into existence by the special and direct activity of the Holy Spirit, working upon the human authors, keeping them from any error in their writing;<sup>16</sup> because the Scripture is divine it has the attributes of authority, certitude, sufficiency, perfection, necessity, and perspicuity;<sup>17</sup> the authority of

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11. *Ibid.*, 174.

12. From his correspondence we know that he was friends or was acquainted with such Puritan pastors as Henry Wilkinson, Richard Baxter, Philip Nye, Thomas Goodwin, William Greenhill, William Bridge, Joseph Caryl, Thomas Brooks, Thomas Coke, David Clarkson, and Thomas Whitaker. He either authored or co-authored letters with or received letters from these men. See Peter Toon, *The Correspondence of John Owen (1616-1683)* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1970).

13. Sinclair *Ferguson, John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 19.

14. Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources* (rev. and ed. Ernst Bizer; Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.).

15. *Ibid.*, 15.

16. *Ibid.*, 16. Heppe writes, "The record of the canonical books came into existence by the special and direct activity of the Holy Spirit, which urged the authors to write, gave them the thoughts and words they were to record, and preserved them from any error in their writing."

17. *Ibid.*, 21.

these books rests simply and solely upon Scripture itself;<sup>18</sup> and Holy Scripture is essentially an absolute authority because it coincides with the authority of God.<sup>19</sup>

The Puritans believed and taught much the same as their Reformed brethren on the Continent concerning Scripture. They taught that: the Bible is the sole and final authority for faith;<sup>20</sup> it was inspired by God, the Holy Spirit being the Author;<sup>21</sup> because it is God's Word it is without error and is infallible in the

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original manuscripts;<sup>22</sup> and it is the authoritative standard for testing religious truth, morality and church practice.<sup>23</sup>

Concerning Reformed hermeneutics Richard Muller has provided some extensive study in the second volume of his work entitled *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*. In it he demonstrates that the post-Reformation dogmaticians taught several things: 1) in order to get at a right interpretation the interpreter must be a person with saving faith, must have a right heart, and must pray to the Holy Spirit for illumination;<sup>24</sup> 2) there is “a single literal and grammatical meaning of the text of Scripture and...[they] argue that no extrapolated allegorical, tropological, or anagogical sense of the text can ever be a firm basis for theological formulation”;<sup>25</sup> “words... can have only a single sense in any particular place—otherwise there is ambiguity of meaning and ambiguity breeds errors in interpretation,” and this sense can be either simple or mixed;<sup>26</sup> 4) the simple sense can be either “proper and grammatical” or “figurative or tropical;”<sup>27</sup> 5) an important interpretive

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18. *Ibid.*, 22.

19. *Ibid.*, 26. Heppie makes more points but these are the pertinent ones for our study.

20. Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 140.

21. *Ibid.*, 141.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 142.

24. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics. Vol. 2, Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 479–87, 505. Muller later states: “Faith, both *fides qua* and *fides quae*, rather than reason remained the norm for interpretation even granting the powerful and necessary role played by the rationality of the individual Protestant exegete” (525).

25. *Ibid.*, 488. This is essentially the interpretive rule *sensus literalis*. They taught that “the right understanding of the actual use of a word in a particular text comes from consideration of ‘the occasion, scope, preceding and following context, and the other circumstances of [the] passage’ or, otherwise stated, ‘the scope, end, matter, circumstances (that is, as Augustine says, the persons, place, and time), the antecedents and consequents of each passage’ and ‘the series and connection of the text’” (*ibid.*, 512-13; the quotes in the text are from William Whitaker’s *A Disputation on Holy Scripture against the Papists, Especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, 9.5).

26. Muller, *Post-Reformation*, 491. The mixed sense is that which is found in prophecy “where part of the sense lies in the type and part in the antitype” (*ibid.*, 492).

27. *Ibid.* The “proper” and “grammatical” is the literal sense as indicated by the words themselves; the “figurative” or “tropical” is the literal sense indicated by what the words signify.

rule was that of the analogy of Scripture;<sup>28</sup> 6) the analogy of faith included the “practice of the church, the decrees of the sounder councils, and the expositions of the fathers” as long as they agreed with Scripture and the analogy of Scripture;<sup>29</sup> and 7) the text of Scripture was accommodated and

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revelation was progressive.<sup>30</sup> Richard Muller makes this overall assessment of the Reformed methods of interpretation:

The exegesis of the orthodox era can be highly textual and grammatical, immersed in the original languages, or it can provide a biblical-theological reading of the text, with reference to extant translations; it can favor a comparative linguistic approach involving the use of ancient versions or it may insist upon the use of the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament and the received Greek text of the New; it can manifest an interest in the relationship between talmudic scholarship and biblical exegesis or totally ignore Jewish interpretations of the text; it may utilize typological readings of biblical themes or reject such readings out of hand; it can favor a grammatical, historical approach or it can emphasize the theological debates concerning a text; it may emphasize problems of interpretation and translation with reference to the history of exegesis from Erasmus and Reuchlin onward or it may seek primarily to develop doctrinal and homiletical *loci* out of the text.<sup>31</sup>

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28. *Ibid.*, 505-6. This means that Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture, or Scripture is its own interpreter. Muller states, “The theological meaning of the words..., appears fully only *from* the analogy of Scripture, specifically, from the conference of the text with other similar texts, and from the subsequent examination of the linguistic forms in the text the grammatical structures and the figures—on grounds provided by the analogy” (*ibid.*, 519).

29. *Ibid.*, 506. Muller states, “The *analogia fidei* permitted the orthodox to approach Scripture creedally and confessionally on the assumption that the creeds and confessions had arisen out of a churchly meditation on Scripture and were therefore to be understood as biblically standardized norms (*norma normata*) ... The analogy of faith is connected, explicitly, with the identification of fundamental articles of faith and, therefore, also with the doctrinal truths identified for the whole church in basic catechesis.” Muller quotes Whitaker from his *Disputations* 9.5: “Now the analogy of faith is nothing else but the constant sense of the general tenour of scripture in those clear passages of scripture, where the meaning labours under no obscurity; such as the articles of faith in the Creed, the contents of the Lord’s Prayer, the Decalogue, and the whole Catechism: for every part of the Catechism may be confirmed by plain passages of scripture” (*ibid.*, 518).

30. *Ibid.*, 529. Muller goes on to say: “The nature of accommodation was a matter of extensive debate and the hermeneutics of most orthodox Protestant theology assumed a movement from promise to fulfillment.”

31. *Ibid.*, 499-500. As an illustration of Reformed principles of interpretation we will note Jerome Zanchi’s twelve principles from his *Praefatiuncula* taken from Muller. They are: 1) all such endeavors must be preceded by the invocation of Christ Jesus who regenerates our souls and leads us to the right understanding of God’s Word; 2) interpretation must be done in the fear of God because it is the beginning of wisdom; 3) we must study the will of God as revealed in Scripture; 4) we need to see that Christ is the substance of the whole of Scripture; 5) we must look to the end of all the doctrine taught in the Scripture, which is the love of God to which are conjoined faith and hope; 6) as preparation for interpretation we should know and understand all the heads of doctrine stated in the Decalogue, the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds (we should also consult the

Concerning Puritan principles of interpretation, James Packer sets forth six rules that sum up their method of interpretation.<sup>32</sup> They are: the Scripture is to be interpreted literally and grammatically;<sup>33</sup> it is to be interpreted consistently and harmonistically and so is one in its message with no real contradiction between part and part;<sup>34</sup> Scripture is to be interpreted doctrinally and theocentrically (it teaches about God and our relationship to him, and it teaches that

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God is central, not humans);<sup>35</sup> it is to be interpreted christologically and evangelically (the Scripture was written to bear witness to Christ in order that people might be brought to salvation in him);<sup>36</sup> the Scripture is to be interpreted experimentally and practically (“doctrines must be taught from the standpoint from which, and applied for the purpose for which, Scripture itself presents them”);<sup>37</sup> and it is to be interpreted with a faithful and realistic application (it is to be meaningful and relevant to those the exegete addresses).<sup>38</sup> Leland Ryken mentions three more that are not given by Packer: the illumination of the Holy Spirit in order to understand the meaning of the Scripture; passages are to be interpreted in their context; and the Scripture is seen in terms of the division of law and gospel.<sup>39</sup> It is within this hermeneutical tradition, both Reformed and Puritan, that John Owen interpreted Scripture.

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best commentators of the ancient and pure Church); 7) we should frequently read and hear Scripture for the sake of drawing our attention to texts that state clearly those things left obscure in other places; 8) the New Testament is the interpreter of the Old; 9) the scope of individual books of the Bible should be noted as an aid to the interpretation of verses within the books; 10) the context of a verse is important, giving attention to the thoughts immediately preceding and following any given text; 11) Scripture does not contradict Scripture; and 12) “the Scriptures are explained by the Scriptures, obscure places by clear” (ibid., 503-4).

32. James I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990). He also teaches that the Puritans were governed by two presuppositions in their approach to interpretation. But since the two presuppositions deal with the nature and the subject matter of Scripture which we have already somewhat addressed earlier under the Puritan doctrine of Scripture, we are passing over these here.

33. Ibid., 101.

34. Ibid., 102.

35. Ibid., 102-3.

36. Ibid., 103.

37. Ibid., 103-4.

38. Ibid., 104-5.

39. Leland Ryken presents six Puritan principles of interpretation. They are: the non-allegorical interpretation of Scripture (the literal or plain sense); the clarity of Scripture to the reader on all matters essential to salvation and Christian morality; the illumination of the Holy Spirit in order to understand the meaning; interpreting passages in context (John Lightfoot writes: “It is the best rule to come to the understanding of the phrases of Scripture, to consider in what sense they were taken in that country, and among the people, where they were written,” and William Perkins concerning the context asked, “Who? to whom? upon what occasion? at what time? in what place? for what end? what goeth before? what followeth?”); the unity of Scripture (it does not contradict itself); and interpreting within the framework of the division of Scripture between law and gospel (threatenings and promises) (Quoted in *Worldly Saints*, 145-49). For an illustration of Puritan principles of interpretation we will note those that

## IV. Owen's Doctrine of Scripture

Having examined the historical and hermeneutical context in which John Owen lived, we will now take a look at his doctrine of Scripture, and then at his principles of interpretation. An excellent study of John Owen's view of Scripture is given by Stanley Gundry in an essay entitled "John Owen on Authority and Scripture."<sup>40</sup> There are a number of important things Gundry tells us

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about Owen's doctrine of Scripture. First, Scripture is necessary for the understanding of the mind of God.<sup>41</sup> Second, the preeminent purpose of Scripture is soteriological.<sup>42</sup> Third, Scripture is the sole authority for the believer's faith and practice.<sup>43</sup> Fourth, the Scripture's authority comes from God himself.<sup>44</sup> Fifth, Scripture is inspired of God, and

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William Perkins advocates in chapter six of his *Art of Prophesying*. They include five background principles: "(1) Have a thorough knowledge of the doctrine of the Bible; (2) Read the Scriptures in order, using a grammatical, rhetorical and logical analysis; (3) Use orthodox writers; (4) Keep common-place books; and (5) Begin with prayer." He then sets forth several principles of interpretation: the rejection of the fourfold method of interpretation of the medieval scholastics for the literal sense; the belief that the chief interpreter of Scripture is the Holy Spirit; the belief that the supreme measure of Scripture is Scripture itself; the analogy of faith which is summarized in the Apostles' Creed and the Ten Commandments; concern for the context; and the comparison of Scripture with Scripture from quoted and thematic parallels. These principles are taken from Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., "William Perkins and the Development of Puritan Preaching" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985), 90–91.

40. This is found in *Inerrancy and the Church* (ed. John D. Hannah; Chicago: Moody Press, 1984). Gundry did his STM thesis on Owen's doctrine of Scripture at the Vancouver School of Theology in 1967. His article is a convincing rebuttal to the Rogers/McKim claim that Owen was a "transitional figure between the Reformation stance of the Westminster Divines and the Protestant scholasticism of his continental contemporaries" (quoted in *ibid.*, 217). Rogers and McKim advanced their claim in *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979). See also Donald McKim's article "John Owen's Doctrine of Scripture in Historical Perspective," *EvQ* 45 (1973): 195-207.

41. Owen states: "Therefore, we can have no direct intuitive notions or apprehension of the divine essence, or its properties. Such knowledge is too wonderful for us ... All the rational conceptions of the minds of men are swallowed up and lost, when they would exercise themselves directly on that which is absolutely immense, eternal, infinite ... That our conceptions of God, and of the glorious properties of His nature, are both generated in us and regulated, under the conduct of divine revelation" (*Works*, 1:65–67, quoted in Gundry, "John Owen," 193).

42. Owen states: "This revelation is made unto us, not that our minds might be possessed with the notions of it, but that we may know aright how to place our trust in him, how to obey him and live unto him, how to obtain and exercise communion with him, until we come to the enjoyment of him" (*Works*, 3:158).

43. Owen says: "It is the glory of the Scriptures, not only to be *the rule*, but the *only one*, of walking with God. If you take others in comparison with it, and allow them in the trim to be rules indeed, though not so exact as the Scripture, you do no less cast down the Scriptures from its excellency than if you denied it to be a rule at all. It will not lie as one of the many, though you say never so often that it is the best" (*Works*, 12:84, quoted in Gundry, "John Owen," 195).

44. For Owen the source and ground of Scripture's authority is God himself, and neither reason nor the church were adequate grounds for belief in Scripture. He states: "The authority of God speaking in and by the penmen of the Scriptures is the sole bottom and foundation of our assenting to them, and what is contained in them, with faith divine and supernatural" (*Works*, 20:38, quoted in Gundry, "John Owen," 200).

so is perfect and infallible.<sup>45</sup> Sixth, the Scripture was written by humans but the Holy Spirit was guiding them to write his words.<sup>46</sup> Seventh, Christ is the sum, substance, and center of Scripture.<sup>47</sup> Eighth, Scripture is the only way to behold Christ.<sup>48</sup> Ninth, God himself is the

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cause of faith in the Scripture as the Word of God.<sup>49</sup> And tenth, the present Hebrew and Greek Scriptures are essentially identical to the original autographs.<sup>50</sup> From this brief synopsis of Owen's doctrine of Scripture we can see that he was in essential agreement with both Reformed and Puritan teaching on this subject, except for the last point which became an issue in the latter half of the seventeenth century.

## V. Owen's Principles of Interpretation

We find Owen's principles of interpretation explicitly stated in two of his works, *Pro Sacris Scripturis Exercitationes adversus Fanaticos* and *Pneumatologia or, A Discourse*

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45. Owen states: "The Word is come forth unto us from God, without the least mixture or intervenience of any medium obnoxious to fallibility, (as is the wisdom, truth, integrity, knowledge, and memory, of the best of all men)" (*Works*, 16:300).

46. Owen writes: "We may also grant, and do, that they [the human authors of Scripture] used their own abilities of mind and understanding in the choice of words and expressions ... But the Holy Spirit, who is more intimate unto the minds and skill of men than they are themselves, did so guide, act, and operate in them, as that the words they fixed upon were as directly and certainly from him as if they had been spoken to them by an audible voice" (*ibid.*, 3:145).

47. He states: "The end of the Word itself, is to instruct us in the knowledge of God in Christ ... Christ is the image of the invisible God, the express image of the person of the Father; and the principal end of the whole Scripture, especially of the Gospel, is to declare him so to be, and how he is so ... This principle is always to be retained in our minds in reading of the Scripture,—namely that the revelation and doctrine of the person of Christ and his office, is the foundation whereon all other instructions of the prophets and apostles for the edification of the church are built, and whereinto they are resolved ... Lay aside the consideration hereof, and the Scriptures are no such thing as they pretend unto,—namely a revelation of the glory of God in the salvation of the church" (*ibid.*, 1:65, 74, 314-15).

48. Owen says: "Our love to Christ ariseth alone from the revelation that is made of him in the Scripture is ingenerated, regulated, measured, and is to be judged thereby" (*ibid.*, 1:161).

49. Owen, while refuting the Roman Catholic notion of church authority, states: "Mad so we believe it [the Scripture], not because men have ministerially led us to the knowledge of it, or have persuaded or commanded us to receive it, or told us it is of God; but because we ourselves have heard and felt him speaking in it. The Spirit shines into our minds by the light of this word, and speaks loudly to our hearts by the power of it, and plainly tells whose word it is; and so makes us yield to God's authority" (*ibid.*, 8:537-38).

50. Owen recognized that there were variant readings and that copyists made errors but he believed that the religious care of the copyists and "the providence of God had preserved the original autographs in their entirety" (Gundry, "John Owen," 209). Owen states: "*The whole Scripture*, entire as given out from God, without any loss, is preserved in the *copies of the originals* yet remaining; what varieties there are among themselves shall afterward be declared. In them all, we say, is every letter and tittle of the word. These copies, we say, are the rule, standard, and touchstone of all translations, ancient or modern, by which they are in all things to be examined, tried, corrected, amended; and themselves only by themselves" (*Works*, 16:357). Owen contradicts himself on this issue.

*Concerning the Holy Spirit.*<sup>51</sup> We will look at each of these treatises in turn to see what he taught on this subject, and then summarize the findings.

In 1658 Owen felt the need to write *Pro Sacris* to buttress two works he had written earlier, *Of the Divine Original...of the Scriptures* and *A Vindication of the Hebrew and Greek Texts*. All three were written in defense of the authority and infallibility of Scripture. Owen wrote *Pro Sacris* from lectures he had given in Oxford “as a supplement and completion of what was already printed [the latter two works].” His immediate purpose for writing it was that “certain fanatics” had been making an attack “on the whole integrity and authority of the Bible.” These fanatics were the Quakers who had risen under the leadership of George Fox in the late 1640s. They were growing by leaps and bounds in the open atmosphere of the 1650s and were a cause of concern for many of the orthodox. *Pro Sacris* was “prepared and at first intended for the benefit of young men [at Oxford], that they might be encouraged to apply the sharpness of their developing intellectual powers in the diligent study of the Sacred Scriptures, without the laborious necessity of following these crows through mud and

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clay.”<sup>52</sup> Owen’s intention was to show that “the very abyss...from whence flows all of these heresies” is anti-scripturalism. He said: “Once anti-scripturalism, the great citadel of all impiety and superstition, be overthrown and destroyed, then whatever wretched little men try to build up in opposition to the truth must totter and fall flat, swift as raindrops in a sharp shower!”<sup>53</sup> In four chapters Owen showed why Scripture was the Word of God, how Scripture was to be interpreted, that the Scripture was perfect, and finally, that the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light was in error. It is the second chapter, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” that gives us some of Owen’s principles of interpretation.

At the outset of this chapter Owen acknowledges the need for some method of Scripture interpretation “by which we may ascertain the mind and genuine intention of the Holy Spirit in it, and so bring out in their due proportion the things necessary to be known for our eternal benefit and salvation, and for the understanding of our required duty and obedience to God.”<sup>54</sup> He goes on with vigor to attack the Roman Catholic

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51. The English translation of the first work is *A Defense of Sacred Scripture Against Modern Fanaticism* found in *Biblical Theology* (trans. Stephen P. Westcott; Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994), 775. The full title is *Pro Sacra Scripturis adversus hujus temporis Fanaticos exercitationes apologeticae Quatuor* [1658]. The second work, *Pneumatologia, or A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, is found in volumes two and three of the Gould edition of Owen’s *Works*.

52. Owen, “Epistle to the Reader,” in *Defense*, 775–76.

53. *Ibid.*, 776.

54. *Ibid.*, 793. Since this English version of *Pro Sacris* is an interpretation/paraphrase, Owen’s Latin original will be given in the notes. Some grammatical/typographical changes to the interpretation have been made where appropriate. The whole paragraph reads, “Etenim cum utrinque in confesso sit (quod etiam impraesentiarum uherius demonstrare aggredimur) opus esse Scripturarum *interpretatione* aliqua, quae mentum & genuinum in iis Spiritus sancti sensum investigare, atque ea ita indè ritè eruere, quae scitu, & cognitu sunt ad salutem necessaria, seu quovismodo ad officium nostrum & obedientiam Deo debitam spectantia, liceat, hujusce rei considerationi istiusmodi postulatorum portenta praestruunt, ut iis concessis, nulli dabitum esse possit, quin omnia adversatorum consilia ita praeriperint, ut quoscunque velint de iis *triumphos* splendide & secure agant” (*Pro Sacris*, 25-26).

teaching that the Roman Church is the only infallible interpreter of the Bible. In answer to the Catholics Owen states “two essential points beyond dispute” which have been taught by “our theologians.” The first point is that “the only unique, public, authentic, and infallible interpreter of Scripture is none other than the Author of Scripture Himself, by whose inspiration they are the truth, and by whom they possess their perspicuity and authority, that is, God the Holy Spirit.”<sup>55</sup>

Owen goes on to state how the Holy Spirit interprets Scripture:

Partly through the express words of Scripture and partly by the revelation of God’s will contained in the wider context, which may be understood by a comparison of text with text, so that which seems to have been more obscurely spoken may be illuminated by what is plainer until an overall understanding of the divine will is gained.<sup>56</sup>

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His second point concerning interpretation is that

every person, however private, is called to a knowledge of God as revealed in the Bible, and so it is the duty of all to learn and investigate, to expound and declare (as he is enabled) the mind and will of God in the Scriptures according to the sense of them, and to apply all of the means at his disposal to that most necessary end, for the building up of his own and others’ faith.<sup>57</sup>

Following this last point he declares that the private Christian not only interprets for himself but also for others under his care, e.g., parents and their children. But, he asks, does this mean that these private persons should be allowed to expound the Word publicly, or should this be left to those separated to the work of the ministry? Owen queries:

What is really in dispute among our learned men is then whether the former class [those not called to the ministry]...should be allowed within the churches of which they are members to occasionally hold meetings of

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55. Owen, *Defense*, 797. “Extra omnem disputationem jamdudum haec duo posuerunt nostri Theologi. 1. Unicum, publicum, authenticum & infallibilem sacrarum Scripturarum interpretem, esse ipsum earum *Authorem*; è ejus afflatu, veritatem, perspicuitatem & Authoritatem suam omnem habent, spiritum nempe Sanctum” (*Pro Sacris*, 30–31).

56. Ibid. “Partita in ipsis Scripturis loquentem, mentemque suam clarè & dilucidè exponentem, eamque per totius divinae doctrinae, seu veritatis in illis traditae *analogiam*, in omnibus partibus seu locis, ubi eum obscurius locutum fuisse videri possit, revelantem, partim, lucem spiritualem in mentes nostras *immitentem*, quâ in omnem necessariam veritatem in verbo patefactam ducamur” (*Pro Sacris*, 31).

57. Ibid. “Cuivis homini utut privato ad cognitionem Dei in Scripturâ revelatam vocato, hoc officii incumbere, ut mentem Dei in Scripturis, hoc est, earum sensum sedulò mediis omnibus in eum finem necessariis adhibitis, investigare, cognoscere, exponere, enarrare debeat, quantum ad propriam in fide aedificationem opus sit” (*Pro Sacris*, 31).

the people, and expound the Scriptures in them to the edification of the Church, as necessity might demand, or be forbidden to do this?<sup>58</sup>

Owen's answer is that Christians other than those called to the ministry are gifted by the Spirit "for the edification of others in the knowledge of God."<sup>59</sup> They also ought to be given liberty to publicly interpret the Scripture, but there is "a limit and bound to their liberty" and that is "'Let all things be done decently and in order (I Corinthians 14:40).'"<sup>60</sup> Owen clearly states his opinion on this matter:

Let a faithful man..., being furnished with the knowledge of God and the requisite Spiritual gifts for the edification of others (graciously bestowed upon him by God), and also having the time and other things necessary for the right performance of this duty granted him by providence, then I certainly would allow him to interpret the

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Scriptures and to meet with others for their edification, even though he does not intend ever to holy orders—providing only that he makes no interruption of an established ministry.<sup>61</sup>

Owen then reasons for several pages with those of the learned men who want to keep unordained men from preaching.

Owen next turns his attention to those he calls modern fanatics (the Quakers) who assert "that *no man at all* should ever be permitted to interpret the Scriptures."<sup>62</sup> He recognizes that they privately read the Scriptures, to some degree know them, and carry them about with them, but "in their meetings, they care not a straw for the Bible, nor utilize it in any way, for they neither read the Word itself, nor expound it in any way, nor

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58. Ibid., 799-800. "Hi vero duûm generum sunt; aliqui enim, sunt mere privati, neque ministerii officium unquam suscepturi; hisce vero, utrum in iis ecclesiis, quarum sunt membra, atque inter earum coetuum, pomaeria, ex ipsarum ecclesiarum mente & consensu, prout sert occasio, vel postulare videtur necessitas scripturas exponere, aut ex iis de rebus divinis, & ad ecclesiae edificationem pertinentibus differere liceat, huc & illuc, inter viros doctos sententiis inclinatur" (*Pro Sacris*, 34-35).

59. Ibid., 802. "Unâ etiam cum eo, per Jesum Christum, Spiritum sanctum, atque ea ipsius dona, quibus habiles & idonei ad alios instruendum in cognitione sui homines reddantur, largâ manu, & variè distribuit" (*Pro Sacris*, 38).

60. Ibid., 800.

61. Ibid., 802. "Sit itaque fidelis aliquis (quod sui est officii qua talis est) cognitione Dei instructus, atque insuper □□□□□□□□□□ spiritualibus ad alios instruendum requisitis, a Deo gratiose donatus; studiumque ac voluntatem habeat, Christo Jesu in opere Evangelii inserviendi, locum vero, tempus, aliaque ad officium prmstandum, ita ut ordinem nullum legitimum inturbet per Dei providentiam opportuna obtinuerit, licitum ei esse *Evangelium praedicare*, scripturas interpretari, conciones ad populum habere, quamvis sacris ordinibus, uti loquuntur, nondum sit initiatus, pronuntiamus" (*Pro Sacris*, 39).

62. Ibid., 805. "Inanis autem est tota ilia de qua paucis egimus *controversia*, neq; titivilitio emptitanda si modo nemini mortalium liceat Scripturam interpretari, aut ejus sensum exponere; Hoc vero est *quodfanatici* nostrates affirmant" (*Pro Sacria*; 43).

make use of testimonies drawn from it to support their teachings.”<sup>63</sup> He then explains this fanaticism under three headings. The first concerns the interpretation of Scripture where he says: “They simply deny that any man is to be permitted to interpret Scripture, to expound any part of it, to explain its sense, to mention any spiritual truth in words other than those of the Holy Spirit, in written words”<sup>64</sup> The second explanation of fanaticism concerns the means of interpretation. Regarding it he states, “They...condemn all of the means by which exposition is arrived at, such as the comparison of parallel passages, careful regard for the context (what has gone before and what follows), repeated readings, attention of the analogy of faith, with such other means of the kind whereby the mind of God can be understood.”<sup>65</sup>

The third explanation has to do with the uses made of interpretations by the Quakers. Owen maintains:

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They hold in hatred and abomination the elucidation of difficult passages, and with that the bringing out into light and condemnation of heresies, proofs of truth, the exposure of false teachers and teachings, and all healthful instruction and exhortation, all edification, in short, all of the lawful means and ends of Scriptural interpretation.<sup>66</sup>

After defining the Quaker fanaticism under these three headings Owen then charges these fanatics with rejecting the explication of facts and the explication of words; and while rejecting these they continue to use the vernacular Scriptures which are themselves an interpretation from the original. Owen states: “To reject *all* interpretation would thus be to deprive themselves of the Scriptures entirely, for all translation is, of necessity, interpretation.”<sup>67</sup> Owen continues saying that they also reject “all those helps to understanding the meaning of Scripture which are contained in commentaries and other books.”<sup>68</sup> After these introductory words he explains what he means by his twofold

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63. Ibid. “In eorum ceteribus autem, eas haud flocci faciunt, neque ullius usus sunt, neque enim unquam aut verbum ipsum legunt, aut aliquam partem ejus exponunt, aut testimoniis ex eo assumptis ad fidem iis quae proferunt” (*Pro Sacris*, 43).

64. Ibid. “*Primo* ideo, ulli homini, sacras Scripturas interpretari, vel ullam earum partem, vel sensum ejus exponere, vel quae sit mens spiritus sancti in verbis quae scripta legimus, aliis verbis enarrare, fas esse negant” (*Pro Sacra*, 44).

65. Ibid., 806. “Unâ cum interpretatione Scripturae, ejusdem media, nempe diversorum locorum colationem, antecedentium & consequentium considerationem, vocabulorum atque phrasium examen, ut quis rite mentem Dei percipiat & intelligat, orationem assiduam, analogiae fidei observationem, atque istius generis alia, omnia, rejiciunt, damnant, execrantur. Ita scotomate nescio quo percussi, ut omnes alii eadem caecitate labarent, contendunt” (*Pro Sacris*, 44).

66. Ibid. “Denique locorum difficultium elucidatio, veritatis manifestatio & probatio, haere[], errorum, falsorum Doctorum & Doctrinae convictio, redargutio, per instructiones & exhortationes aedificatio, omnesque alii *fixes*; legitimae interpretationis Scripturarum, iis odio sunt, & abominationi” (*Pro Sacris*, 45).

67. Ibid. “Ne □□□□□□□□□□ rejectione, omni Scripturarum usu se privarent” (*Pro Sacris*, 45).

68. Ibid. “*Intelligentiam dandam per Scripturam ipsam*, hostili animo infectantur, sed & commentarios, cunctosq; alios libros, quibus pars aliqua Scripturae interpretatur” (*Pro Sacris* ; 45-46).

definition of exposition that he calls explication of facts and of words. The first, “the explication of facts”, “deals with the translation of the manuscripts of the Hebrew Old and the Greek New Testaments into all other languages, for the use of God’s people who do not know the so-called ‘original languages’.”<sup>69</sup> The second definition is the “explication of words,” that is, the explanation of the words of Scripture in order that the divine mind be revealed to people and that they be instructed in His ways. Owen states, “The words of the Bible have meanings, and those meanings contain the judgment of God. It is our duty to strive to understand that judgment, and we should allow no impediment to restrict our passing on to others what we have been privileged to see.”<sup>70</sup>

In the following section Owen touches on several things. First, he proves that ministers of the Word according to the Bible and Christ’s example are to exposit the Scripture. He also teaches that all the saints are called to study the Word in order that they might grow in the knowledge of God; and thirdly that Christians are to test the spirits and settle controversies by the common rule, which is the Bible itself. Owen states: “Where else can we go but to the Word of

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God? And to have our faculties trained by practice in the Word of God is the same as learning to discern the mind of God displayed in the Bible.”<sup>71</sup> He continues, “It is so certain as to be beyond dispute that God, in His infinite wisdom, not only arranged the declaration of His will in the Scripture, but also arranged that declaration in such a manner as absolutely necessitates the duty of exposition as a function of the Church so long as the Scriptures shall last.”<sup>72</sup> Owen then challenges the fanatics asking them to show how we can understand supposed contradictory passages, figures, and types “without the aid of any manner of interpretation!”<sup>73</sup> In closing he answers three objections that might be made by the Quakers.<sup>74</sup> It is important to note that in his answers

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69. Ibid., 807. (“Interpretatio, uti dictum superius, duplex est; *verborum* una, seu □□□□□□□□□□, rerum altera, seu cum □□□□□□□□□□ ...: prima est sacrae Scripturae ex codicibus *Heebraicis & Graecis*, vet-eris & novi Testamenti, in alias linguas ad usum populi Dei, linguas illas *originales* quas vocant ignorantis, translatio” (*Pro Sacris*, 46).

70. Ibid., 808. “Cure itaque *verba* Scripturae *sensum* habeant, seu mentis Dei sententiam contineant, atque eum sensum nos percipere atque intelligere teneamur, neque aliquid obstat quo minus, quem nos concepimus sensum, aliis declarare possimus” (*Pro Sacris*, 48-49).

71. Ibid., 813. “An alió quam ad verbum Dei amandandi simus? at vero *sensus exercitatos habere in verbo Dei, ad discretionem boni & mali*, nihil aliud est, quam facultatem discernendi veritatem, seu mentem Dei in verbo propositam obtinere” (*Pro Sacris*, 56).

72. Ibid., 813-14. (“Imo tam certum est qnam quod certissimum, Deum in infinitá sua sapientiá, eam voluntatis suae declarationem quae in verbo scripto continetur, ita *temperasse*, atque totam ejusdem revelandi *methodum* eo ordine disposuisse, ut necessitatem interpretationis in Ecclesiá continuandae, quamdiu ipsum verbum contineretur, extra omnem dubitationis aleam poneret” (*Pro Sacris*, 56).

73. Ibid., 814. The complete sentence reads, “Age ideo si viri sint *fanatici*, experiantur vires, & quid de locis istiusmodi seposita & rejecta omni *interpretatione* sentiendum sit ostendant” (*Pro Sacris*, 57).

74. The first objection is: since all interpretation must be given by God and the (orthodox) teachers are not inspired and do not have immediate revelations from God concerning the sense of words, then they should not teach. Owen’s answer is that at least the Quakers concede that the Scripture can be interpreted. They, however, also need to see that “to expound to others the truth already revealed in the Bible requires [in contrast to God’s inspiration of the human

Owen mentions the fallibility of the interpreter several times. In one place he states, “This [the fights of the interpreters among themselves over their different interpretations] is the true factor that results from *the fallibility* of the interpreters. It is no

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result of the fact of interpretation. If errors are made by some workers, shall all the workmen abandon their tasks?”<sup>75</sup>

Having looked at Owen’s earlier polemical work on hermeneutics, we will turn our attention to his later and more mature work on the subject. This is a better and more complete study because of its non-polemical nature.<sup>76</sup> It is the second part of the sixth book of his work *Pneumatologia or, A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*. The scope of the whole of book six was

to manifest that such is the abundant goodness, wisdom, and grace of God, in granting unto us the inestimable benefit of his word, that no persons whatever shall or can come short of the advantage intended by it... that every one who takes care of his own present and eternal welfare may and shall..., infallibly attain such measure of the knowledge of his mind and will, with the full assurance therein, as will be sufficient to guide him unto eternal blessedness.<sup>77</sup>

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authors of Scripture] no more than common spiritual graces” (ibid., 815). The second objection is that interpretation only makes “what was clear unclear” and that “by a fallible interpretation, the infallible Word is made fallible.” Humans are fallible and subject to error and so are their interpretations. “The preacher speaks not the Word of God, in all of its pure and luminous truth, but instead adds his own human conjectures. Therefore, the whole ministry, so far as it consists of expository preaching and interpretation of the written Word, is without substance, uncertain, and utterly superfluous” (ibid.). Owen’s reply is twofold: 1) although it is true that all interpreters are fallible, this does not nullify the preaching ministry which God has instituted “as a constant and unchanging means of exploring doctrine and truth to that end” (ibid., 816); and 2) the Word properly interpreted “is still the Word of God, and so the exposition (if it departs not from the analogy of faith) is also the Word of God, so far as it is founded on and expands upon the written Word” (ibid.). Here again Owen admits the fallibility of the interpreter, nevertheless, the correct exposition shares in infallibility, “so far as it expounds the infallible Word.” He states: “A human speaker deals with infallible material, and our own human insufficiencies, in the carrying out of any duty whatsoever, cannot and must not render the duty illegitimate!” (ibid.). Owen mentions a third objection which follows from the last and appears to support the Quaker’s contention that interpretation is a fallible work. It is that the interpreters have bitter fights “among themselves over those contrary positions which their interpretations lead them to assume.” Owen answers that “this is the true factor that results from *the fallibility* of the interpreters” but “it is no result of the fact of interpretation” (ibid.). Just because some interpreters err, should all interpreters give up their task?

75. Ibid. The whole paragraph reads, “Objiciunt tantem miras *interpretum* inter se digladiationes, atque in interpretando *contradictiones*, hoc vero interpretum, non interpretationum, operantium non operis ex vitio cum sit, ad quaestionem propositam nihil omnino facere videtur” (*Pro Sacris*, 61).

76. In the preface “To the Reader,” Owen states: “Moreover what is discoursed on these things is suited unto the edification of them that do believe, and directed unto their furtherance in true spiritual obedience and holiness, or the obedience of faith. Hence, it may be, some will judge that our discourses on these subjects are drawn out into a greater length than was needful or convenient, by that continual intermixture of practical applications which runs along in them all. But if they shall be pleased to consider that my design was, not to handle these things in a way of controversy, but, declaring and confirming the truth concerning them, to accommodate the doctrines treated of unto practice, and that I dare not treat of things of this nature ha any other way but such as may promote the edification of the generality of believers, they will either be of my mind, or, it may be, without much difficulty admit of my excuse” (*Works*, 3:9).

The first part of this book, “Reason of Faith, or An Answer unto that Inquiry, ‘Wherefore We Believe the Scripture to be the Word of God,’” was written to show that the Scripture is divine revelation. The second part, “The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word with Assurance Therein,” was written to help the Christian understand the mind and will of God which is revealed in the Scripture. Concerning this part he says, “The knowledge and understanding of those things wherein our present duty and future state of blessedness or misery are immediately concerned, are no less indispensably necessary unto us than is the belief of the Scripture to be the Word of God.”<sup>78</sup>

For Owen the purpose of this part of the book is “to declare the ways and means whereby we may assuredly attain that understanding.”<sup>79</sup> It is here that he explicitly lays out his principles of interpretation. In this part Owen denies the Roman Catholic claim to infallible interpretation of the Scriptures and asserts the right of private judgment in interpretation. He then declares his twofold method for attaining the right understanding of the mind of God in the Word.

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The first is that the Holy Spirit is the efficient cause of our understanding of God’s Word. In this section Owen lays out a vitally important principle of interpretation, the necessity of the illumination of the Holy Spirit. He states: “The Holy Spirit of God, enlightening our minds in the exercise of our own reason or understanding, and in use of the means appointed of God unto that end, is the only safe guide to bring us unto the full assurance of the mind and will of God as revealed in the Scriptures.”<sup>80</sup> Almost eighty pages are devoted to proving and elaborating on this principle.

The second part to his method for a right understanding of God’s mind in the Scriptures is the use of proper means. According to Owen there are two kinds of means: 1) the reading of the Scriptures; and 2) the spiritual, disciplinarian, and ecclesiastical helps for the improvement of this reading.

The first and primary means to be used for a right understanding of the mind of God in the Scripture is the “diligent reading of the Scripture, with a sedate, rational consideration of what we read.”<sup>81</sup> What Owen encourages is a frequent, constant reading that is “attended with due consideration of the things read, inquiry into them, meditation on them, with a regard unto the design and scope of the place, with all other advantages for the due investigation of the truth.”<sup>82</sup> In addition, the interpreter should seek not to impose his own meaning on a text but go “nakedly to the word itself, to learn humbly the mind of God in it.”<sup>83</sup> In this reading we are to give: “1. A due consideration of the

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77. Taken from the preface of John Owen’s “The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word with Assurance Therein” (*ibid.*, 4:121).

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*, 127.

81. *Ibid.*, 199.

82. *Ibid.*, 200.

*analogy of faith* always to be retained; 2. A due examination of the *design and scope of the place*; [and] 3. A diligent observation of *antecedents* and *consequents*.”<sup>84</sup> For Owen the reading of the Scriptures was the most important means of understanding the mind of God.<sup>85</sup>

The second means to be used are those sorts of things we have at hand that help us to improve our understanding. They fall under three headings: the spiritual, the disciplinarian, and the ecclesiastical. Concerning the spiritual, the first thing required by Owen is prayer. This is “*fervent and earnest prayer* for the assistance of the Spirit of God revealing the mind of God, as in the whole Scripture, so in particular books and passages of it.”<sup>86</sup> The content of this prayer is twofold: generally, that the interpreter pray that God would enlighten his mind

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and lead him into the knowledge of the truth;<sup>87</sup> and specifically, that he pray concerning “*particular occasions*, or especial places of Scripture, whose exposition or interpretation...[he] inquire[s] after.” Under the latter he writes:

Shall we think it strange for a Christian, when it may be after the use of all other means, he finds himself at a loss about the true meaning and intention of the Holy Spirit in any place or text of Scripture to betake himself in a more than ordinary manner unto God by prayer, that he would by his Spirit enlighten, guide, teach, and so reveal the truth unto him?... This... is the *sheet-anchor* of a faithful expositor of the Scripture, which he betakes himself unto in all difficulties; nor can he without it be led into a comfortable satisfaction that he hath attained the mind of the Holy Ghost in any divine revelation.<sup>88</sup>

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83. *Ibid.*, 18:9, quoted in Gundry “John Owen,” 212.

84. Owen, *Works*, 4:201.

85. Owen states: “And truly I must needs see that I know not a more deplorable mistake in the studies of the divines, both preachers and others, than their diversion from an immediate, direct study of the Scriptures themselves unto the studying of commentators, critics, scholiasts, annotators, and the like helps ... Not that I condemn the use and study of them, which I wish men were more diligent in, but desire pardon if I mistake, and so only surmise, by the experience of my own folly for many years, that many which seriously study the things of God do yet rather make it their business to inquire after the sense of other men from the Scriptures than to search studiously into them themselves” (*ibid.*, 12:52, quoted in Gundry, “John Owen,” 213).

86. Owen, *Works*, 4:201.

87. *Ibid.*, 202. Owen also says under this point: “Whoever, in the diligent and immediate study of the Scripture to know the mind of God therein so as to do it, doth abide in fervent supplications, in and by Jesus Christ, for supplies of the Spirit of grace, to lead him into all truth, to reveal and make known unto him the truth as it is in Jesus, to give him an understanding of the Scriptures and the will of God therein, he shall be preserved from pernicious errors, and attain that degree in knowledge as shall be sufficient unto guidance and preservation of the life of God in the whole of his faith and obedience” (*ibid.*, 204).

88. Owen says something interesting under this point that should be noted: “The labours of those who have gone before us are of excellent use herein, but they are yet very far from having discovered the *depths* of this vein of wisdom; nor will the best of our endeavours prescribe limits and bounds to them that shall come after us” (*ibid.*, 204-5).

The second thing required under this heading according to Owen is, “*Readiness to receive impressions from divine truths as revealed unto us, conforming our minds and hearts unto the doctrine made known.*”<sup>89</sup> For Owen this means not simply learning “*the form of the doctrine of godliness*, but to get the *power* of it implanted in our souls ... [It is not] to seek after mere *notions of truth*...[but to seek] after an *experience of its power* in our hearts.”<sup>90</sup> The third spiritual means for understanding the mind of God is the interpreter’s “*practical obedience in the course of...[his] walk..., before God.*” Owen elaborates on this, saying, “The true notion of *holy, evangelical truths* will not *live*, at least *not flourish*, where they are divided from a holy conversation.”<sup>91</sup> A fourth means Owen gives is the interpreter’s desire, pursuit, and growth in knowledge. He writes: “A *constant design for growth and a progress in knowledge out of love to the truth and experience of its excellency*, is useful, unto the right understanding of the mind of God in the Scriptures.”<sup>92</sup> The fifth and last spiritual means for understanding the mind of God is to attend “*sundry ordinances of spiritual worship.*”<sup>93</sup>

In his conclusion to this section Owen makes a remark about the difference of interpretation between secular and religious texts which summarizes the importance of the “spiritual means” for understanding the mind of God. He states:

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For although the Scripture hath many things in *common* with other writings wherein *secular arts and sciences* are declared, yet to suppose that we may attain the sense and mind of God in them by the mere use of such *ways and means* as we apply in the investigation of truths of other natures is to exclude all consideration of God, of Jesus Christ, of the Holy Spirit, of the end of the Scriptures themselves, of the nature and use of the things delivered in them; and, by consequent, to overthrow all religion.<sup>94</sup>

According to Owen the second sort of means by which a Christian interpreter is helped to understand the mind of God in the Scriptures is the “disciplinarian.” For him this means using the “*common arts and sciences*” in the study of Scripture which “have no *moral good* in themselves” but “may be used aright and in a due manner” or “may be abused” in the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>95</sup> The most important of the disciplinarian means according to Owen “is the *knowledge of and skill in the languages wherein the Scripture was originally written.*” The reason for this is that “the very words of them

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89. *Ibid.*, 205.

90. *Ibid.*

91. *Ibid.*, 206.

92. *Ibid.*

93. *Ibid.*, 207. Although Owen does not explain what he means by this he likely means such things as the Lord’s Day services, partaking of the Lord’s Supper, group prayer, etc.

94. *Ibid.*, 208.

95. *Ibid.*, 209-10.

therein were peculiarly from the Holy Ghost.”<sup>96</sup> He goes on to say, “There is in the originals of the Scripture a peculiar *emphasis* of words and expressions, and in them an especial energy, to imitate and insinuate the sense of the Holy Ghost unto the minds of men, which cannot be traduced into other languages by translations, so as to obtain the same power and efficacy.”<sup>97</sup> Owen recognizes that the original languages render a better understanding of the original meaning of the words. Here he attributes this meaning to the Holy Ghost without mentioning the human author.

The importance of knowing the original languages for the interpreter comes out again when he says, “It is of a singular advantage, in the interpretation of the Scripture, that a man be well acquainted with the original languages, and be able to examine the use and signification of words, phrases, and expressions as they are applied and declared in other [classical] authors.”<sup>98</sup> Owen even encourages a knowledge of Hebrew for the study of New Testament Greek because “there is such a *cognition* and *alliance* in and between the senses of the one and the other as that a due comparing of their expressions doth mutually contribute light and perspicuity unto them.”<sup>99</sup> Seeking to encourage his readers in the study of the original languages he further says, “In the interpretation of the mind of any one, it is necessary that the *words* he speaks or writes be rightly understood; and this we cannot do immediately unless we understand the *language* wherein he speaks, as also the *idiotisms* of that language, with the common use and intention of its *phraseology* and expressions.”<sup>100</sup>

Moreover, recognizing the problems for the expositor who does not know the original languages, he writes:

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And what perplexities, mistakes, and errors, the ignorance of these *original languages* hath cast many expositors into, both of old and of late, especially among those who pertinaciously adhere unto *one translation*, and that none of the best, might be manifested by instances undeniable, and these without ‘number.’<sup>101</sup>

In conclusion Owen states:

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96. *Ibid.*, 210.

97. *Ibid.*, 214.

98. *Ibid.*, 215.

99. *Ibid.*

100. *Ibid.*

101. *Ibid.* This does not mean that a person needs to have this knowledge to understand the Scriptures for “the sense and substance of the Scripture being contained entirely in *every good translation...*, men may, by the use of the means... [of the analogy of faith], and under the conduct of the teaching of the Spirit of God in them, usefully and rightly expound the Scripture in general unto the edification of others” (*ibid.*, 216). He also warns that a little knowledge of the original languages “is of little use unless it be to make men *adventurous* in betraying their own ignorance” (*ibid.*).

This *skill and knowledge*, therefore, is of great use unto them who are called unto the interpretation of the Scripture; and the church of God hath had no small advantage by the endeavours of men learned herein, who have exercised it in the exposition of the words and *phraseology* of the Scriptures, as compared with their use in other authors.<sup>102</sup>

But he also cautions that this skill and knowledge can be abused as it was in his own day with learned men making “*critical observations...*, unaccompanied with that humility, sobriety, reverence of the Author of the Scripture” and without “respect unto the *analogy of faith*.”<sup>103</sup> Owen’s priority for the “spiritual means” over the “disciplinarian” is evidenced in this caution.<sup>104</sup>

The second of the disciplinarian means for understanding the Scriptures is “an acquaintance with the *history and geography of the world* and with *chronology*.” By chronology he means an understanding of the progress of revelation. For he says:

God hath hereby given an account of the *beginning, progress, trials, faith, obedience*, and whole proceedings of the church, in the pursuit of the promise, unto the actual exhibition of Jesus Christ in the flesh..., to see the call and foundation of the church in the first promise given unto our common parents; what additions of light and knowledge he granted unto it successively by new revelations and promises.<sup>105</sup>

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Besides this understanding of chronology Owen also believed that “there is a skill and understanding in the records and monuments of time, the geographical respect of one nation unto another, the periods and revolutions of seasons and ages, required to apprehend them aright in their first literal instance and intention.”<sup>106</sup>

The interpreter not only needs to understand how history relates to the Scriptures but also how to “rightly judge” the accomplishment of “prophecies...of things to come in the

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102. Ibid. He later says: “*Substantial* knowledge and skill in the *originals* is useful, and indeed necessary, unto him that is called unto the exposition of the Scripture” (ibid., 218). Owen believed this skill was very important, “indeed necessary,” for the pastor and/or teacher in the church.

103. Ibid., 216.

104. This does not mean the fruit of their labors is useless, for “the stones they dig may be made use of by a skilful builder” (ibid., 217). Owen also emphasized the “spiritual means” when he said a little later: “But this is but one means of many that is useful to this purpose [understanding the sense of the Scriptures], and that such as, if it be alone, is of little or no use at all. It is fervent prayer; humility, lowliness of mind, godly fear and reverence of the word, and subjection of conscience unto the authority of every tittle of it, a constant attendance unto the analogy of faith, with due dependence on the Spirit of God for supplies of light and grace, which must make this or any other means of the same nature effectual” (ibid., 219).

105. Ibid., 220. He also, however, cautioned against framing revelation “in rigid confessions, or systems of supposed propositions, a Procrustes’ bed to stretch them upon, or crop them unto the size of, so to reduce them to the same opinion in all things, is a vain and useless attempt, that men have for many generations worried themselves about, yet continue so to do” (*Works*, 14:314, quoted in Gundry, “John Owen,” 215).

106. Owen, *Works*, 4:220.

church and amongst the nations of the world.”<sup>107</sup> Consequently, the interpreter needs “some good apprehension of the *distinction of times, seasons, and places.*”<sup>108</sup> Owen continues:

How can any man arrive unto a tolerable acquaintance with the *accomplishment of these prophecies* as to what is already past, or have a distinct grounded expectation of the fulfilling of what remains foretold, without a prospect into the state of things in the world, the revolutions of times past, with what fell out in them, which are the things spoken of?<sup>109</sup>

He does caution, however, looking into Scripture for “minute chronological determinations..., when the sense of Scripture is *obscure* in those things, and its determination only general, so as to be equally capable of various senses.” It is at these times the interpreter needs to measure his scriptural computations “with the *undoubted monuments* of times in the nations of the world.”<sup>110</sup>

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The third of the disciplinarian means is “a skill in the *ways and methods of reasoning*, which are supposed to be common unto the Scriptures with other writings.”<sup>111</sup> For Owen this means,

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107. Ibid., 220-21.

108. Ibid., 221.

109. Ibid. For an example of Owen’s application of his reading prophecy in light of the historical events of his time see his two sermons ha his treatise entitled, ‘A Memorial of the Deliverance of Essex County, and Committee,’ taken from Hab 3:i-9 (ibid., 8:71ff.). Peter Toon explains how Owen saw the Essex events in light of Scripture. He states: “Under the twentieth principle he expounded his belief that God caused the second civil war to take place (that is, by His inscrutable provocation of the minds of the royalist leaders) in order to have the enemies of the Gospel finally defeated and to unite the saints in the common cause. Had God not caused the war then the persecution and tyranny of former days would have returned. Owen claimed that in the activities of the rebellious army led by the Earl of Norwich he could discern ‘sundry instances of how God mixed a perverse spirit of folly and error in all their counsels’ in order eventually to engineer their defeat. Or, put another way, ‘God hath interposed in our quarrels from heaven.’ Owen’s view of the Essex rebellion was necessarily biased since he understood everything in terms of God’s judgment, chastisement or deliverance of His saints on earth. He did not think it important to consider what we may term ‘secondary causes’” (*God’s Statesman*, 32). Another example is found in his sermon preached shortly after the execution of King Charles I entitled, “Righteous Zeal Encouraged by Divine Protection,” taken from Jer 15:19-20 (*Works*, 8:128ff.). In this sermon Owen compared Judah, at the time of Jeremiah’s ministry, with that of seventeenth-century England. God judged Judah for her sins, and so God punished England in the civil wars and in the death of the king. If England wanted God’s favor then all false worship had to be removed and Scriptural religion had to be pursued.

110. Ibid., 4:222. Owen uses Daniel’s seventy weeks as an illustration. There were two decrees mentioned in Scripture. He believed the one issued by Cyrus in Ezra 1:1-4 could not be the correct one without doing “violence unto all monuments, records, and circumstances of times in the world” (ibid., 223). The second decree by Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:11-26 is, therefore, the correct one.

111. Ibid.

An ability to judge of the sense of propositions, how one thing depends on another; how it is deduced from it, follows upon it, or is proved by it; what is the design of him that writes or speaks in any discourse or reasoning; how it is proposed, confirmed, illustrated,—is necessary unto any rational consideration to be exercised about whatever is so proposed unto us.<sup>112</sup>

This skill helps the interpreter to understand things like the “*scope* of the *author* in the place” he is studying, “as also things *antecedent* and *consequent* to the place and words to be interpreted.”<sup>113</sup> But Owen cautions the interpreter that this skill is “to be subject to the wisdom of the Holy Ghost in the Scripture.... The principal matter of the Scripture is *mysterious*, and the mysteries of it are laid up therein by God himself, and that in a way *inimitable* by the skill or wisdom of men.”<sup>114</sup> Owen states his reason for this caution:

In the consideration of all the effects of infinite wisdom, there must be an allowance for the deficiency of our comprehension; when humble subjection of conscience, and the captivating of our understandings to the obedience of faith, is the best means of learning what is proposed unto us. And there is nothing more contemptible than the *arrogancy* of such persons as think, by the shallow measures and short lines of their own weak, dark, imperfect reasoning, to fathom the depths of Scripture senses.

That which has priority concerning the meaning of a text is the analogy of faith and not our reasonings. He continues: “It is true, we can receive nothing, reject nothing, as to what is true or false, nor conceive the sense of any thing, but by our own *reasons and understandings*. But the inquiry herein is, what *supernatural aid and assistance* our minds and natural reasons stand in need of to enable them to receive and understand aright things spiritual and supernatural.”<sup>115</sup> Again it is evident that the “spiritual means” is primary, and controls the “disciplinarian.”<sup>116</sup>

The third sort of “means” for understanding the mind of God in the Scriptures according to Owen is the “ecclesiastical.” This “means” is “the *ministry of*

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112. Ibid.

113. Ibid., 224.

114. Ibid., 224-25.

115. Ibid., 224-26.

116. Owen also saw the danger of philosophical reasoning concerning the faith. He states in his work on justification: “Shall, as much as I possibly may, avoid all those *philosophical* terms and distinctions wherewith this *evangelical* doctrine hath been perplexed rather than illustrated.” And he later says: “To carry it out of the understandings of ordinary Christians, by speculative notions and distinctions, is disserviceable unto the faith of the church; yea, the mixing of evangelical revelations with philosophical notions hath been, in sundry ages, the poison of religion. Pretence of accuracy, and artificial skill in teaching, is that which giveth countenance unto such a way of handling sacred things. But the spiritual amplitude of divine truths is restrained hereby, whilst low, mean, philosophical senses are imposed on them” (ibid., 5:8,10).

*the church* in all ages” which he puts under three headings: the Catholic or universal tradition; the consent of the Fathers; and the writings of any persons holy and learned whether past or present. For Owen, “These things belong unto the ministry of the church, and so far as they do so are sanctified ordinances for the communication of the mind of God unto us.”<sup>117</sup> Owen, however, discounts the first two headings because as Sinclair Ferguson says, “[He] had no patience with the concept of standardized authoritative interpretations of Scripture. The idea was wholly alien to his approach to the nature of the Bible. Catholic, Patristic, and other interpretations, *as such*, have little value.”<sup>118</sup> On the other hand, Owen felt that the writings of any holy and learned persons in the history of the church, whether they be that of Chrysostom, Theophylact, Jerome, Ambrose, Bucer, Calvin, Martyr or Beza, were the only proper ecclesiastical helps that were beneficial to the interpreter.<sup>119</sup> And even concerning these helps Owen realizes their benefit depends on the interpreter. He says:

Now, concerning them all I shall only say, that the Spirit of God makes them useful and prosperous according to the counsel of his own will. Some are prone in the use of them to lean unto their own understandings, and consequently to wander in and after the imaginations of their own minds, corrupting the word of God and endeavouring to pervert his right ways thereby. Others he leaves in the *shell of the text*, to exercise their skill about words, phrases, and expressions, without leading them into the spiritual sense of the word, which is its life and power. In some he blesseth them to the full and proper end; but not unless they are in a compliance with the spiritual means and duties before insisted on.<sup>120</sup>

## VI. Summary of Owen’s Hermeneutic

After examining these two important sections of Owen’s works which expose his hermeneutic, we find at least twelve principles of interpretation. They are:

1. The only infallible interpreter of Scripture is the Holy Spirit, therefore, it is necessary that the interpreter be illumined by the Spirit as he/she goes about the task of interpretation.<sup>121</sup>
2. Every Christian is to interpret Scripture.<sup>122</sup>

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117. *Ibid.*, 4:226.

118. Ferguson, *John Owen*, 199.

119. Owen, *Works*, 4:228–29. Owen particularly appreciated the writings of the latter four men.

120. *Ibid.*, 229.

121. *Defense*, 797, and *Works*, 4:127, 201.

3. The interpreter must have a right heart, attitude, and life before God in order to interpret the Scriptures properly.<sup>123</sup>
4. The human interpreter is fallible in his interpretation.<sup>124</sup>
5. The best interpretation demands an understanding of the original languages.<sup>125</sup>

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6. In order to understand the meanings of the original words, expressions, and phraseology in the Bible, the interpreter should compare these with the same used in other ancient manuscripts.<sup>126</sup>
7. The interpreter should use the analogy of faith.<sup>127</sup>
8. The interpreter should pay careful regard to the context.<sup>128</sup>
9. The interpreter should seek to understand the author's purpose.<sup>129</sup>
10. The interpreter should seek to understand the Scriptures theologically.<sup>130</sup>
11. The interpreter should know general history and geography in order to understand Scripture properly.<sup>131</sup>

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122. *Defense*, 797.

123. *Works*, 4:206–7.

124. *Defense*, 816.

125. *Ibid.*, 806–7, and *Works*, 4:210. Examples of his use of Hebrew and Greek are replete throughout his works.

126. *Defense*, 807, and *Works*, 4:215–16. For an example of this see his *Biblical Theology*, book three, chapter two, where he refers to Erpemius' *On the Hebrew Language*, Buxtorfs *Dissertation on the Hebrew Language*, and Junius' *On the Hebrew Language*.

127. *Defense*, 797, 806, 813, and *Works*, 4:198–99, 201, 216. Owen's "analogy of faith" is the same as the Reformed "analogy of Scripture" which Richard Muller defined earlier. See notes 28 and 29. For an example of his use of the "analogy of faith" see his *Of Communion with God The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* (*ibid.*, 2:19ff.), where he uses numerous verses from different parts of the Bible to show that we have communion with the Father in love. Concerning the Reformed concept of the "analogy of faith" he had little use for the "standardized authoritative interpretations of Scripture" (Ferguson, *John Owen*, 199), but he did appreciate holy and learned persons of the church. So what did he think of catechisms and confessions that were authored by some of these men like Ursinius or the Westminster Divines? He probably appreciated them, not as a help to interpret Scripture but only as an expression of it. It appears, therefore, that Owen did not use or encourage the use of the Reformed "analogy of faith" to interpret the Scriptures.

128. *Defense*, 806, and *Works*, 4:201. For an example of Owen setting the verse in its historical and biblical context, see his sermon "The Beauty and Strength of Zion" (*ibid.*, 9:307ff.) where he discusses the author and purpose of this Psalm.

129. *Ibid.*, 4:223–24. In his sermon "The Beauty and Strength of Zion" he believes and seeks to prove that the author's purpose for the Psalm is "purely mystical and prophetic . . . [It is] a graphical description of the defence that God will at all times give his church" (*ibid.*, 9:308).

130. *Ibid.*, 4:220. This is exemplified in his work *Biblical Theology* that traces theology from Adam to Christ.

12. The interpreter should use commentaries and other books to help him/her understand Scripture.<sup>132</sup>

## VII. Conclusion

What can we learn from our study of John Owen's hermeneutics? Several things, I believe. Historically, we can see that he is in essential agreement with both the Reformed and Puritan hermeneutic as well as their doctrine of Scripture, and therefore he is a good representative of both Puritan and Reformed thought on this subject. In addition, we can see that there is much in common between the Puritan hermeneutic and our present-day conservative Evangelical

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approach. In a comparison study made of John Owen's principles of interpretation with that of modern conservative Evangelicals found in the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics*, I have found a great deal of agreement.<sup>133</sup> There is either implicit or explicit agreement on eighteen of the twenty-five Articles. Of the seven remaining Articles: Owen touches on Article XIX indirectly; he simply does not address five of them (X, XII, XIII, XIV, XXI); and he clearly disagrees with Article XVI which deals with textual criticism.<sup>134</sup> The six Articles that Owen does not address or with which he

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131. *Works*, 4:220–22. For an example of his use of geography and history see his *Biblical Theology*, book three, chapter two, dealing with “The Original Language, the Confusion of Languages and the Sibylline Oracles,” where he refers to or quotes from such geographies or histories as Bochart's *Sacred Geography*, Tactius's *Annals*, Philostratus's *Life of Appollonius*, *Josephus' s Antiquities of the Jews*, and Zonaras's *Annals*.

132. Owen, *Defense*, 806, and *Works*, 4:228–29. For an example of his use of other authors see the first chapter of *Of Communion with God* (*ibid.*, 2:5-9), where he uses Tertullian (two different works), Augustine (two different works), Aristotle (three different times from his *Ethics*), Cicero, and Cyprian.

133. It is found in *JETS* 25 (1982): 397-401. Those who signed this document include James Montgomery Boice, James I. Packer, Kenneth Kantzer, Francis Schaeffer, J. Barton Payne, Norman Geisler, R. C. Sproul and Gleason Archer.

134. The following is a brief summary of my comparison. The first five articles of the *Chicago Statement* deal with the Scripture as it relates to hermeneutics. They are: the normative authority of Scripture is God himself; Scripture is God's Word in human language; the central focus of Scripture is the person and work of Jesus Christ; the Holy Spirit works faith in the Scripture's message; and the Holy Spirit enables believers to appropriate and apply Scripture to their lives. Owen makes statements in his *Works* that agree with each of these five articles. The *Chicago Statement Articles* VI to VIII deal with the text of Scripture itself affirming that: God's truth in the Bible is propositional, objective, and absolute; the meaning of each text is single, definite, and fixed; and the Scriptures contain teachings and mandates that apply to all cultures and situational contexts. Owen makes statements that implicitly agree with all of these Articles. Owen makes explicit statements that are in agreement with Article IX which is a general statement on hermeneutics. Articles X, XII, XIII, XIV of the *Chicago Statement* are not addressed by Owen because the issues of literary genre and translation of the Scriptures into other languages were not as important a concern to people in Owen's time as they are in our own. Owen also does not directly address the problem of presuppositions in interpretation nor whether the Scripture is true when it touches on matters of nature. Articles XIX and XXI do address these subjects. Owen does agree with Articles XI and N.,X which state that translations of biblical texts can communicate the knowledge of God and that extra-biblical data has value for clarifying what Scripture teaches. He also concurs with the grammatical-historical method of interpretation affirmed in Articles XV and XVI. He, however, does not agree with textual criticism as stated in Article XVI. Owen is in

does not agree have to do with modern hermeneutical issues such as literary genre, translation, and textual criticism, which were not explicitly addressed or were fairly novel in Owen's time. On the other hand, the nineteen similarities between Owen and modern Evangelicals are found in their doctrine of Scripture and their approach to the interpretation of Scripture, e.g., analogy of faith, historical-grammatical, etc. Does this not suggest to Evangelicals that there is much we can learn from reading Owen and the Puritans on this subject? In fact, I believe there are some important things that we need to hear from the Puritans and Owen.

I would like to conclude by briefly mentioning three of those things which ought to help us in our own practice of interpretation and exposition. First, we are reminded by him to use all the tools available in order to get at the true meaning of the text. This is particularly applicable to pastors and teachers who

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tend to be more concerned about communication than precision in interpretation. We need to be concerned primarily about the correct meaning of the text in its proper context, and secondarily about its communication.<sup>135</sup> Owen points us in the right direction here.

Secondly and more importantly, we are reminded by Owen that unless the Holy Spirit guides and leads us in our interpretation we can sorely miss the true meaning of the text. Does not Owen help us to see that we must come to the Scriptures in humble submission and dependence on Him and not our own abilities to interpret the Scriptures? His priority for the "spiritual means" is certainly something of which all interpreters, teachers, preachers, and pastors need to be reminded.

Thirdly, from looking at Owen we are reminded that there is more to interpretation than he understood and practiced. Some examples include taking into greater consideration the literary genre of the text, as well as having a better awareness of our presuppositions as we approach our hermeneutical task. Both of these issues are being addressed today by Evangelical scholars.<sup>136</sup> But my fear is that many Evangelicals do

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harmony with Articles XVII and XVIII which proclaim that Scripture is consistent, that it is its own best interpreter, and that its interpretation is always correct elucidating the single meaning of the inspired text. Owen also agrees with Articles XXII, XXIII, and XXV which teach that Gen 1–11 is factual, that Scripture is clear (particularly on the subjects of sin and salvation), and that proper preaching expounds the text of Scripture as the Word of God. He strongly concurs with Article XXIV that a person does not need the expertise of a biblical scholar to understand Scripture.

135. This does not mean that communication is unimportant but that true interpretation is primary. For it is the truth of his Word that God uses to convert and edify by his Spirit. My communication only elucidates the truth, it doesn't bring about conversion or edification; only through his Word understood truly does the Spirit accomplish these things.

136. For literary genre see Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (2d ed; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); and Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). For the issue of presuppositions and related issues, see for example, Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). Some other works on hermeneutics include Joel B. Green, ed., *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); David Alan Black and David S. Dockery, *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation* (Grand

their hermeneutics in ignorance of these matters. Like Owen we are confident that we can come “nakedly to the word itself” and read the truth off the text without due recognition of our presuppositions, our finitude, and our fallenness. Ought we not to be more humble about our ability to understand the text, without, however, losing confidence in adequately arriving at its truth? We need to remember that Owen’s overly confident hermeneutic encouraged an incorrect interpretation of the historical events of the 1640s.<sup>137</sup> Regrettably, many present-day Evangelicals are guilty of comparable presumption and error in their eschatological pronouncements. Nevertheless, as pastors and as Bible College and Seminary professors we need to be more aware of these additional issues for our hermeneutical task and consider them carefully in our study of the biblical text so that we may have a more accurate (and humble) understanding of the text, and so of the truth.

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Rapids: Zondervan, 1991); and Philip Satterthwaite and David E Wright, *A Pathway into Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

137. See n. 109 above.