

John Owen's *Dissertation on Divine Justice*:
An Exercise in
Christocentric Scholasticism

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Introduction

When John Owen wrote his *Dissertation on Divine Justice* in 1652, he was not only attacking a view of Christ's atonement that was held by those whom he would ordinarily have regarded as his allies, he was also in effect publishing a retraction of his own earlier belief.¹ The question he addressed was one of fundamental importance to the Christian faith: Given the existence of sin, was God's vindicatory justice absolutely necessary, or could he pardon sin by a mere act of his will? The answer to this question had important repercussions for doctrines both of salvation and of Christ: If God wished to forgive sinners, was the death of Christ necessary on the basis of God's essential justice or simply of his decree? In other words, was atonement something demanded by the very being of God or simply by a free act of his will? While the young Owen, along with many of his Reformed colleagues, had originally held to the latter position, by 1652 he had come to the conclusion that any understanding of atonement that did not insist on the absolute necessity of Christ's death, opened the door to views of salvation that were inimical to the Gospel. Indeed, at one point in the treatise, he makes a direct connection between denial of the absolute necessity of atonement and the birth of Socinianism:

I have engaged in this task from an earnest desire of preserving undiminished the glory of divine justice, and of establishing the necessity of the satisfaction of Christ, lest the Socinians should wrest to their purpose the arguments of this learned man [William Twisse], on the principal of which they place a principal

¹ For Owen's writings, see *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Gould, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1850-1855), hereafter cited as *Works*. A good modern biography is P. Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1971). For studies of his theology, see J. R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: P. Lang, 1991); S. B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987); R. C. Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification: A Comparative Study in Reformed Spirituality* (New York: P. Lang, 1995); C. R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997); also U. S. G. Rehman, "Theologia Traditio: A Study in the Prolegomenous Discourse of John Owen (1616-1683)," (Ph.D. diss., University of Oxford, 1997).

dependence, and by which they acknowledge that they have been induced to adopt heretical opinions.²

It was, he felt, a small step from denying the necessity of vindictory divine justice to denying the punitive, substitutionary character of Christ's sacrifice. For this reason, he was quite prepared to go into print and attack men such as William Twisse and Samuel Rutherford with whose orthodoxy on other central Christian doctrines he would have had little argument.³

While the treatise itself is primarily aimed at defining diving justice both in terms of God's own being and in its relation to the sinner, it raises a number of other questions that have an important bearing on Owen's theology and method as a whole. This article is therefore an attempt not simply to expound Owen's position on this one issue but to see how his understanding of the nature of vindictory justice is rooted in both his doctrine of God and his understanding of revelation. It will also demonstrate that Owen's arguments in this treatise provide a good example of how philosophical concepts drawn from scholastic authors could be used to strengthen the Christocentric focus of Reformed theology rather than to weaken it, as much of the current scholarship on Reformed Orthodoxy seems to assume.⁴ First, however, it is

² *Works*, 10:594. The classic Socinian statement of Christology is Faustus Socinius's 1578 treatise, *De Jesu Christo Servatore*. This work was a sustained attack on the doctrine of satisfaction and does contain some indications that emphasis on God's absolute power, an element held in common with men such as Twisse and Rutherford, was a contributing factor in this rejection of the orthodox position: See A. W. Gomes, "De Jesu Christo Servatore: Faustus Socinius on the Satisfaction of Christ," *WTJ* 55 (1993): 209-31. For a good general discussion of Reformed and Socinian Christology, see R. S. Franks, *A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ*, vol. 2 (London, n. d.). Owen's views, including his change of mind, are discussed on pp. 135-50.

³ Twisse's views on this subject are expressed in *Vindiciae Gratiae Potestatis ac Providentiae Divinae* (Amsterdam, 1632) 1.25, digr.8 (pp. 198-207), and Rutherford's in his *Disputatio Scholastica de Divina Providentia* (Edinburgh, 1649). The emphasis of these men upon God's absolute power is a point of contact with Socinius's *De Jesu Christo Servatore*, which Owen would no doubt have regarded as pointing to theological presuppositions that could not provide a firm basis for avoiding the excesses of the Socinian position. Thus, while the debate is primarily about the necessity of Christ's atonement, the really important issue is the presuppositional framework underlying this: in terms of the order of being, the doctrine of God; in terms of the order of knowing, the relationship between God's revelation and his essence. For further discussion of Twisse's arguments, particularly in relation to his use of medieval sources, see Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, chapter 3.

⁴ For example see E. Bizer, *Fruhorthodoxie und Rationalismus* (Zurich, 1963); B. G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth Century France* (Madison, 1969). For an example of scholarship that draws on Armstrong and that is directed specifically at Owen, see A. C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790, an Evaluation*. Clifford's work should be read in conjunction with the critique of his views in Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, passim. In recent years, the approaches of Bizer, Armstrong et al. have come under increasing criticism: See, for example, R. A. Muller, "Calvin and the 'Calvinists': Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities Between the Reformation and Orthodoxy," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 345-75 and *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (1996): 125-60. For a good synopsis of

important to see how Owen's own view on the atonement underwent change. Only then can the significance of his 1652 treatise be truly appreciated.⁵

Owen's Early Position

In 1647, Owen published his most important work on the atonement, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. The treatise was an anti-Arminian polemic, aimed at asserting that Christ's death actually accomplished salvation for the elect and did not simply make it possible. In book 2, chapter 2, Owen addresses the question of the end purpose of Christ's death, and it is here that he deals with the teaching of "Arminius with his followers" that Christ's death was necessary because God wished to pardon sinners but could not do so until the obstacle of sin had been removed by Christ's atonement.⁶ The first criticism Owen makes of this position is that it is built on a flawed foundation: the notion that God could not have pardoned sin without Christ's atonement. In this context, he makes the following unequivocal statement:

The foundation of this whole assertion seems to me to be false and erroneous, namely, that God could not have mercy on mankind unless satisfaction were made by his Son. It is true, indeed, supposing the decree, purpose, and constitution of God that so it should be, that so he would manifest his glory, by the way of vindicative justice, it was impossible that it should otherwise be...but to assert positively that absolutely and antecedently to his constitution he could not have done it, is to me an unwritten tradition, the Scripture affirming no such thing, neither can it be gathered from thence in any good consequence.⁷

the history of scholarship on Reformed orthodoxy, and a clear exposition of the significance of the new approach developed by Muller et al., see W. J. van Asselt, "Studie van de gereformeerde scholastiek: Verleden en toekomst," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 50 (1996): 290-312.

⁵ Previous scholars have noted the change in Owen's thinking on divine justice and have seen its implications as primarily Christological and soteriological. While they are substantially correct in this, they have not attempted to probe deeper into Owen's argument and thus not noticed the wider implications of it for other aspects of his theology: see D. D. Wallace, *Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology 1525-1695* (North Carolina, 1982), 152-53; H. Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn: Richard Baxter's Doctrine of Justification in Its Seventeenth-Century Context of Controversy* (Zoetermeer, 1993), 130-31; R. K. M. Wright, "John Owen's Great High Priest: The High Priesthood of Christ in the Theology of John Owen, (1616-1683)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Denver, 1989), 142-44.

⁶ *Works*, 10:205-8.

⁷ *Works*, 10:205.

It is quite clear from this passage that Owen regards the necessity of the atonement as based on God's decree, and thus vindictory justice as resting upon his will, his *potentia ordinata*, and not on his essence as such. While he does not explicitly say so, he is clearly operating with an implicit distinction in his doctrine of God between absolute and ordained power.⁸ According to God's absolute power, he could forgive sin in any way that did not involve logical contradiction; thus it is only after God has ordained, or decreed, that sin must be punished, that Christ's atonement can be described as necessary, and then only on the basis that God is immutable and thus cannot change what he has willed.

In asserting this ordained necessity, Owen actually stands within the mainstream of Western views of atonement. While Anselm had argued for the absolute necessity of the Incarnation and the Atonement on the basis of his doctrine of God and sin, his position had been considerably modified by the Medieval Schoolmen who otherwise adopted the basic structures of his argument. For example, Thomas Aquinas addressed the issue in the *Summa Theologiae*, and argued that while Christ's passion was indeed the most suitable way for God to save humanity, there was no absolute need for him to have acted in this way if he wished to forgive sin.⁹ This tendency to make God's will the decisive factor in the atonement's necessity became more pronounced in the Scotist school and continued into Reformed theology. Thus, Calvin, in commenting on John 15:13, makes the following comment:

God could have redeemed us by a word or a wish, save that another way seemed to him best for our sakes: that by not sparing His own and only-begotten Son, he might testify in His person how much he cares for our salvation. And those hearts

⁸ The distinction between God's absolute power (the set of all possibles that he could enact) and his ordained power (the subset of those possibles that he had decided to enact) had a long medieval pedigree and became in later medieval theology a means for safeguarding God's transcendence and unknowability while maintaining the fundamental reliability of the created order. It had a somewhat mixed reception among Protestants, with some, such as Calvin, explicitly rejecting it while, arguably, implicitly assuming much of its content. On the medieval use of the distinction, see H. A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Durham, 1983); F. Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz* (Ithaca, 1984); Eef Dekker, "Duns Scotus over absolute en geordineerde macht," in *Aktueel Filosoferen*, ed. W. van Dooren and T Hoff (Delft, 1993). On Calvin's attitude to the concept, see "Calvin and the Absolute Power of God," in *Calvin in Context*, ed. D. C. Steinmetz (Oxford, 1995).

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a.46.14.

must be harder than iron or stone which are not softened by the incomparable sweetness of the divine love.¹⁰

Here, it is clear that Calvin grounds the necessity of Christ's death in an act of God's will, not in his vindicatory justice. This view was not found to be at all unacceptable amongst the Reformed orthodox in seventeenth-century Britain, and the Westminster Confession, not surprisingly, makes no explicit ruling on this issue. As noted above, it is found in the writings of such impeccably Orthodox figures as Twisse and Rutherford and is thus scarcely a peculiar position for a Reformed theologian to hold.

Before moving to a discussion of Owen's later position, it is worth noting one more aspect of his objection to the Arminian position that will have significance for the 1652 treatise: his attitude toward Scripture. Owen is quite confident that there is no direct scriptural affirmation of the absolute necessity of atonement and that no such inference can legitimately be drawn. In view of the fact that he is later to deploy scriptural texts and inferences to establish just such a case, it is obvious that the alteration in his understanding of atonement requires an alteration in his understanding of the general relationship that exists between God's essence and his revelation. While the full significance of this change can only be understood from the perspective of the later treatise, it would appear that in 1647 Owen is operating with the implicit assumption that God's revelation, in whatever form, is of his decretive will and not necessarily of his essential being. It is thus not legitimate to use this revelation to make inferences about what is and is not necessary for God in terms of his absolute power.

The Argument of the *Dissertation*

By 1652, it is clear that Owen no longer considered the Arminians as the major threat to orthodoxy, even though he still regarded them as a significant foe. Instead, his attention had turned to the Socinians, whose principle crimes included the denial of the punitive nature of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This denial was itself rooted in their understanding of God's vindicatory justice and thus intimately linked to their doctrine of God. What concerned Owen was the fact

¹⁰ John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 11-21*, ed. T. F. and D. W. Torrence (Edinburgh, 1961), 100; cf. John Calvin, *Institutes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 2.xii.1 and xvii.1.

that some of the most orthodox of his contemporaries, in rejecting the absolute necessity of Christ's atonement, seemed to concede just a little too much to the Socinian viewpoint. In his Preface to the Reader, Owen makes it quite clear that it was with some reluctance he took up his pen to write about this issue, being intimidated both by its doctrinal complexity and by the caliber of some of those with whom he had to disagree. Nevertheless, the nature of the issue compelled him to deal with it.

[I]t is intimately connected with many, the most important articles of the Christian doctrine, concerning the attributes of God, the satisfaction of Christ, and the nature of sin, and of our obedience, and that it strikes its roots deep through almost the whole of theology, or the acknowledging of truth which is according to godliness.¹¹

Thus, the nature of God's justice is of such importance that it stands at the very center of true Christian doctrine, and that a correct understanding of it is the key to a true doctrine of God and of Christ.

The treatise itself is comprised of eighteen chapters that divide into parts: The first, consisting of chapters 1 to 7, deals with the problem systematically, moving from definition to proof; the second, chapters 8 to 17, deals with the arguments alleged by specific opponents or allies of Owen's view. Chapter 18 summarizes the applications of the doctrine. For the student of Owen's theology, part 1 is without doubt the most significant section of the treatise. However, while part 2 is, in the main, simply an application of the principles elaborated in part 1, it does

¹¹ *Works*, 10:487. The opponents Owen mentions by name include his beloved Augustine, Calvin, Musculus, Twisse, and Vossius. He also lists his allies on this issue: Paraeus, Piscator, Molinaeus, Lubbertus, Rivetus, Cameron, Maccovius, Junius, and the professors at Saumur: see *Works*, 10:488-89. The inclusion of such as Cameron and the school of Saumur is interesting as it is the tendency of modern scholarship (e.g., the works of Armstrong and Clifford) to portray Reformed scholasticism, as epitomized by Owen, as antithetical to Saumurian Amyraldianism, especially on the atonement. Owen's comment here clearly points to the fact that the relationship between himself and Amyraldianism is more subtle than previous scholarship has supposed, a view that is confirmed by the persuasive arguments of Rehnman for Cameron as the source of Owen's structuring of the historical covenants in *Theologoumena Pantodapa*: See "Theologia Traditia," 244-50.

nevertheless contain passages of significance for an understanding of the importance of Owen's argument.¹²

Owen starts his work by carefully defining the precise point at issue: the nature of God's justice. The fundamental distinction Owen makes is between God's justice as it is in himself and as it manifests itself in his external acts. This is indeed the crucial distinction in his argument on which all else depends. As we shall see, it also points to the deeper problem of the nature of revelation to which we have already referred. For Owen's argument to work, he must not only demonstrate that God's external acts of justice have to conform to his inner justice, but that the knowledge we have of his external acts through revelation does actually tell us something about God as he is in himself.

Considered absolutely, Owen regards God's justice simply as God's perfection:

The justice of God, *absolutely* considered, is the universal *rectitude* and perfection of the divine nature; for such is the divine nature antecedent to all acts of his will and suppositions of objects towards which it might operate.¹³

In other words, God's justice as it is in himself, is simply the sum of all his perfections, and these perfections stand logically prior to his acts of will, acts that therefore have to be consistent with his perfection. The implications for God's external works are immediately obvious, and Owen proceeds to make the connection explicit. God's justice, he says, performs two kinds of external acts: those that are absolute and that he characterizes as *words* (i.e., when God speaks or legislates, his utterances are based on eternal, absolute truth); and those that are necessary and that he speaks of as *deeds* (i.e., when God acts toward an object outside of himself, he necessarily acts in a manner consistent with his perfections, e.g., he gives to each what they deserve.)¹⁴ This distinction parallels another that Owen makes between the attributes: those that presuppose no external object and those that do. Among the former, Owen lists

¹² For further discussion of Owen's doctrine of God, see Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, chapters 2 and 3.

¹³ *Works*, 10:498.

¹⁴ See *Works*, 10:499-500. Cf. his comment on p. 503: "Justice presides, as it were, in all the divine decrees, actions, works, and words, of whatsoever kind they be. There is no egress of the divine will, no work or exercise of providence, though immediately and distinctly breathing clemency, mercy, anger, truth, or wisdom, but in respect thereof God is eminently said to be just, and to execute justice."

wisdom and power. God can be said to exercise these simply in his very act of existence. Among the latter, Owen specifies vindicatory justice: God cannot be said to exercise such sin-punishing righteousness unless one presupposes the existence of sin and thus of something external to the Godhead.¹⁵

The key element that emerges from this argument is the relational nature of God's vindicatory justice. Having deemed God's essential justice to be the sum of all his perfections, he argues that vindicatory justice is one part of the outworking of God's perfect nature, simply the external working of God's perfections in the manner demanded by the sinfulness of the creature. There is, in other words, no single internal attribute that corresponds to God's justice and upon which his vindicatory justice is based. As a consequence of this, God's vindicatory justice must be understood not as something that possesses existence of its own right but as something that exists only as part of the relationship between a perfect God and his creatures.¹⁶

This relationship of God to his creatures is defined by his omnipotent perfection. Having created rational beings that depend on him, God's perfection first manifests itself absolutely in terms of a penal law. This is because such a penal law makes explicit the nature of the Creator-creature relationship and thus simply reflects the unalterable ontological truth of humanity's subordination to God. Furthermore, this penal law also points to the second aspect of God's justice: the necessity of the punishment of sin. For God to forego his right to punish the sinner would therefore amount to a denial of the relationship that exists between Creator and creature, a rejection of the immutable fact that humans are rational beings dependant upon God for their existence and answerable to him for their deeds. This relationship is ontological, rooted not merely in God's decretive will but in the fact that he is the uncreated source of all being. Therefore, the implication of Owen's analysis is that the position of theologians such as Twisse and Rutherford amounts to saying that God is capable of rejecting the real relation between himself and his creatures and thus, by implication, of contradicting his own essence.¹⁷

At this point, Owen anticipates a number of objections that could be directed at him. First, does he not thus make retribution something that must follow immediately upon sin? His answer is to assert that God's justice demands punishment in general, but that this demand does

¹⁵ See *Works*, 10:508.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10:509-10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10:509.

not necessitate that this be instantaneous. God has established a dispensation whereby the need for punishment does not in itself specify the time at which such punishment must take place.¹⁸

Secondly, and more seriously, there is the problem of the implications that Owen's view holds for God's freedom. Indeed, God's freedom is one of the central issues in the debate, as no orthodox divine would have denied the fact of Christ's atonement, or its necessity in light of the decree; however, Owen's insistence on its absolute necessity could well be construed as a denial of God's freedom to act in any other way, and thus of his omnipotence. Owen's defense of God's liberty against the background of such views is twofold. First, it is clear from his argument that God's vindictory justice is not absolutely necessary, but as its relational nature shows, it is contingent on the existence of rational, sinful creatures and, thus, on the creation. Creation, as an uncoerced act of God's will, is not necessitated by his own being but is an act of free choice; thus, no act involving the creation is, in an absolute sense, necessary.¹⁹ Secondly, Owen denies that God's freedom requires that he be able to choose whether to punish sin or not but simply that such punishment must be performed with a concomitant liberty, i.e., in a way that is entirely consistent with his own nature.²⁰ In asserting this, Owen argues for an intellectualist view of God in language with which any scholastic Thomist, or indeed Arminius himself, would have agreed:

[T]hat God punishes sins with a concomitant liberty, because he is of all agents the most free, we have not a doubt. Thus his intellectual will is carried towards happiness by an essential inclination antecedent to liberty: for to act freely is the very nature of the will; yea it must necessarily act freely.²¹

¹⁸ Elsewhere in the treatise, Owen also contends that he is not arguing for the necessity of any particular kind or degree of punishment, simply that punishment of some form is a general necessity: See *Works*, 10:613.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10:509, 511.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10:509-510.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10:510. Cf. Arminius comment to Perkins: "Velim autem, mi Perkinse, ut libertatem voluntati Dei nullam tribuas, quae in ipsius justitiam impingat. Iustitia enim voluntate prior est et istius regula, voluntati libertas ut modus eius attribuitur. Quare etiam modus iste a justitia circumscribitur. Neque tamen propterea negabitur Deum esse volens liberrimum. Quum enim volens liberrimum sit, non quod omnia vult, sed quod quaecunque vult, libere vult, quid officit libertati Dei, si dicatur quaedam non velle, quia per justitiam suam illa velle non posit, quum illa libertas non a superiore extra Deum, sed ab ipsa justitia Dei circumscribitur?" *Opera Theologica* (Leiden, 1629), 68. Arminius's Aristotelianism, and his use of Thomistic and Suarezian patterns of thought is well-documented in R. A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius* (Grand Rapids, 1991); also Eef Dekker, *Rijker dan Midas: Vrijheid, genade en predestinatie in de theologie van Jacobus Arminius, 1559-1600* (Zoetermeer, 1993).

Therefore, God's freedom is not his ability to choose between alternative courses of action but his ability to will happiness without hindrance. Thus, to assert that Owen denies God's freedom by arguing for the necessity of atonement is simply to betray a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of that freedom. One might as well argue that the fact that God cannot tell a lie makes him less than all-powerful.²²

This, then, is Owen's argument for the necessity of atonement: God's justice is the sum of all his perfections and has priority over his will; all of his external acts are to be consistent with this; given the existence of sinful creation, God must punish because failure to do so would amount to a denial of the necessary relationship that exists between creature and creator. Having laid out the doctrinal content of his argument in such a careful fashion, he now proceeds to justify his claims by advancing evidence, first, for God's essential justice, and then for its necessary outworking in punishment. It is the nature of this evidence that points to the deeper shift that has occurred within his theology. However, before this shift can be examined, it is first necessary to have some overview of the kind of evidence Owen regards as proving his case.

The Evidence for Essential Vindictory Justice

In presenting the evidence for his position, Owen distinguishes between that which proves God's essential justice and that which proves that the outworking of this justice is necessary. The former falls into four major categories: the word of God; the rational conscience; works of providence; and Christology. The latter is also divided into four: the nature of God's hatred of sin; the scriptural description of God in respect of sin; the nature of God's glory; and the necessity of Christ's death.

Bearing in mind Owen had stated just five years earlier that no passage of Scripture could be adduced in support of the position for which he is here arguing, it is surprising how much scriptural evidence he now feels able to bring forward. This evidence he divides into three categories: verses that oppose God's holiness to sin; those that depict God as judge; and those that refer to the punishment of sin. The passages that he chooses make it clear that the reason for

²² Francis Turretin clarifies the issue of God's freedom by arguing that God has freedom of indifference *in primo actu*, i.e., in his decision of whether to create or not to create, but subsequently, *in secundo actu*, no freedom of indifference but only freedom of spontaneity, i.e., freedom from external coercion: see *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* (Geneva, 1688), 1.3.14.3 and 1.10.3.4-5.

God's vindicatory justice is not simply his will but the attributes of his very being. For example, in the first category he starts by commenting on Habakkuk 1:13, "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity," upon which he makes the following observation:

The prophet here ascribes to God the greatest detestation, and such an immortal hatred of sin that he cannot look upon it, but, with a wrathful aversion of his countenance, abominates and dooms it to punishment. But perhaps God thus hates sin because he wills to do so, and by an act of his will entirely free, though the state of things might be changed without any injury to him or diminution of his essential glory. But the Holy Spirit gives us a reason very different from this, namely, the purity of God's eyes: "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil." But there is no one who can doubt that the prophet here intended the holiness of God. The incomprehensible, infinite, and most perfect holiness or purity of God is the cause why he hates and detests all sin; and that justice and holiness are the same, as to the common and general notion of them, we have shown before.²³

As is clear from the last sentence, Owen is here expounding this text in line with his understanding of God's justice as the outworking of his inner perfection in its relationship to sinful creatures. The other texts he lists are all dealt with in a similar fashion.²⁴ The second and third categories, dealing with God as judge and sin as punished are also expounded as reflecting God's essential being.²⁵ In doing so, Owen reveals that his understanding of the nature of revelation has changed: Five years earlier he himself would no doubt have referred all of these verses to God's decretive will; here he asserts that they refer to God's essential being. Clearly, there is now a much closer correlation of God's being and God's revelation in Scripture.

Owen's argument from the testimony of conscience is based in part on biblical considerations and in part on reason and empirical evidence from the world around. These two strands, reason and revelation, he sees as bound together in a syllogism:

²³ *Works*, 10:513.

²⁴ The other texts with which he deals are, in order: Josh. 24:10; Ex. 34:5-7 and 23:7; and Ps. 5:4-6.

²⁵ Under the second category, he deals with Gen. 18:25, Rom. 3:5-6, Acts 17:31, Rom. 2:5, Rev. 16:5-6, Ps. 9:4-5, and Ps. 119:137. Under the third category, he expounds Rom. 1:32, 2 Thess. 1:6, Heb. 2:2, and Jude 7.

What common opinion and the innate conceptions of all assign to God, that is natural to God; but this corrective justice is so assigned to God: therefore, this justice is natural to God.²⁶

Owen regards the middle term of the syllogism as taught by Romans 1:32. Thus, in terms of the seventeenth-century Reformed understanding, the syllogism possesses biblical legitimacy because, although his crucial assumption in the major premise, that common consent refers to what is natural, i.e., essential to God, is a supposition based on reason rather than faith, the middle term is, in this particular instance of the argument, a truth of revelation.²⁷ Again the theological model with which he is working is one whereby revelation, in this case a form of general revelation, gives insight into God's actual being rather than merely into his will. We shall have to return to this assumption later, but for the moment it is sufficient to note that, in the form of the syllogism, it enables Owen to quote all manner of non-Christian authors, from Homer to Pliny, in support of his general thesis. He also adds an entire chapter on the prevalence of human sacrifices amongst primitive peoples. This, he argues, reflects an innate understanding of the need to propitiate God with blood sacrifice, an understanding that does not relate to what God may or may not have chosen to will, but to what his very essence demands.²⁸

Owen's argument from providence starts with his defining precisely what he means by anger. Anger, he observes, is the human emotion most frequently ascribed to God in the Scriptures. As such, it denotes the effects of his anger on the world around us. Evils, punishments, misfortunes—all are evidence of God's wrath. So self-evident is this, that Owen feels no need to elaborate further, although he does make the point that such evidence reveals

²⁶ *Works*, 10:517.

²⁷ On the use of syllogisms in Orthodox theology, see R. A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics 1: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1987), 246-6; also *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics 2: Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, 1993), 519.

²⁸ See *Works*, 10:541. This is one of the most interesting and unusual parts of the whole treatise. In order for this evidence to be of use, Owen has to argue that the universal existence of this tendency is the result of an innate principle implanted by God and not through contact with the Jews, as Rutherford asserted. This is a fascinating example of how primitive social anthropology was utilized by theologians in doctrinal controversy: See *Works*, 10:525-41. Of course, the problem with Owen's argument from universal consent is that the very controversy in which he is engaged effectively precludes its use in establishing his case: If God's vindicatory justice was *universally* acknowledged, then the controversy would never have arisen. That Socinus and others did deny it points to the inadequacy of this argument from natural theology, even with the biblical warrant of Rom. 1:32, to deal with this issue in a decisive manner. Nevertheless, Owen seems to have been blissfully unaware of this difficulty.

God's essential character. Again, the close relationship between God as he is in himself and God as he has revealed himself to be is quite striking.²⁹

Christology forms the next part of Owen's positive exposition of his doctrine, and gives a clear indication that his theology is, at heart, thoroughly christocentric. God reveals himself through both nature and law, says Owen, but these cannot ultimately compare with Christ:

[T]here are some attributes of his nature the knowledge of which could not reach the ears of sinners but by Christ, such as his love to his peculiar people, his sparing mercy, his free and saving grace, even the others, which he hath made known to us in some measure by the ways and means above mentioned, we could have no clear or saving knowledge of unless in and through this same Christ.³⁰

One of these attributes that is revealed in nature but more perfectly so in Christ is that of vindicatory justice. In setting forth Christ as a propitiation for sin, God demonstrated to humanity that sin required punishment. In one of the most powerful and hard to refuse statements in the treatise, Owen asks "what kind of love can that be which God hath shown, in doing what there was no occasion for him to do?"³¹ It is only in the light of the atonement's absolute necessity, he contends, that Christ's death can truly reveal both God's justice and his mercy.

In dealing with the necessity of the outworking of God's justice, Owen's arguments add little to what he has already said. It is, however, interesting to summarize briefly the points he makes in this context. First, he addresses the nature of God's hatred of sin: "He who cannot but hate all sin cannot but punish sin; for to hate sin is, as to the affection, to will to punish it, and as to the effect, the punishment itself. And to be unable not to will the punishment of sin is the same with the necessity of punishing it."³² Thus, God's hatred of sin must manifest itself in an act of God's will to punish sin. Not to do so would involve a contradiction in God's being, implying that his intellect hated sin but that his will acted in a manner contrary to this. Such a position

²⁹ See *Works*, 10:546

³⁰ *Works*, 10:547. This passage is unequivocal evidence that Reformed orthodoxy's so-called biblicist emphasis on the written word of Scripture did not necessarily undermine a Christ-centered understanding of revelation.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10:548.

³² *Ibid.*, 10:550.

would be a denial of Owen's intellectualist doctrine of God where the intellect apprehends the good and directs the will toward it. In advancing this argument, Owen is attempting to force his opponents into the embarrassing position of having to deny that God hates sin.

The second type of evidence, that from Scripture, focuses on the description of God as "a consuming fire." Drawing on the analogy of fire, Owen points out that fire necessarily burns all that it comes into contact with; thus, if God comes into contact with what is sinful, he too must necessarily consume it. Again, close connection between God's essence and his revelation is assumed.³³

The last two pieces of evidence are, in effect, reiterations of earlier statements: God's position as just ruler demands that he punish sin, as failure to do so would be a contradiction of his position, of his holiness, and thus of his being;³⁴ and Christ's death, if it was not absolutely necessary, appears an unnecessary and meaningless act. In other words, theological rationality demands that atonement is necessary in an absolute sense.³⁵

This, then, is the evidence Owen offers for his position. One central presupposition is obvious throughout: the close correlation of God's essence and his revelation. It is this assumption that must therefore form the focal point of the final section of this paper.

Revelation and the Doctrine of God

In terms of being, God obviously precedes his revelation, but in terms of human knowledge, the order is reversed. In the case of Owen's *Dissertation*, the content of his doctrine of God can be brought into sharpest focus by a close examination of the presuppositions that underlie his notion of revelation. While the major argument of this treatise is obviously about God's justice, it is clear that Owen's understanding of revelation in this work of 1652 is significantly different from that expressed in *The Death of Death*. It is most likely that this change is a consequence, not a cause, of Owen's christological shift, but without it Owen's mature view of Christ's atonement could claim no superiority in terms of biblical rationale to that which he had come to reject. The essence of this new position is an assumption that, just as

³³ Ibid., 10:553-54.

³⁴ Ibid., 10:554-556.

³⁵ Ibid., 10:556-558.

God's external acts conform to his internal being, so also his revelation gives genuine insights into the nature of his being. There must, in other words, be an epistemological pathway from God's revelation to his essence. This pathway is provided by Owen's adoption of certain metaphysical concepts that clarify the relationship between God and creation.

First, this relationship is understood by Owen, as also for Thomas Aquinas and Thomism in general, in terms of the Aristotelian notion of cause and effect. Owen applies this notion particularly to the Scriptures as a way of reasoning back from statements about God's external works to his essential being. Indeed, at one point in the *Dissertation*, he makes the following comment:

A *second* act presupposes a *first*, and a constant manner of operating proves a habit; a sign also expresses the thing signified. Because God doeth good to all, we believe him to be good, and endowed with supreme goodness; for how could he so constantly and uniformly do good, unless he himself were good? Yea, from second acts the holy Scriptures sometimes teach us the first; as, for instance, that God is the *living* God, because he giveth *life* to all, that he is *good*, because he *doeth good*. Why may we not also say that he is just, endowed with that justice of which we are treating, because "God perverteth not judgment, neither doth the Almighty pervert justice," but "the LORD is righteous, and upright are his judgments"? A constant, then, and uniform course of just operation in punishing sin proves punitory justice to be essentially inherent in God.³⁶

The Aristotelian presuppositions behind this passage are obvious and undergird the crucial connection between God's being and his revelation, which Owen needs as a basis for his argument. In the order of being, God's first acts, his attributes, determine the character of his second acts, his effects; thus, in the order of knowing, God's second acts give real insights into his essence. The interesting thing is that Owen sees the Bible itself as teaching the validity of inferences from effect back to cause. As far as he is concerned, this is no purely rationalist theory of analogy based on the metaphysics of being but a method of doing theology that possesses

³⁶ Ibid., 10:558-59.

clear biblical sanction. His implicit adoption of Aristotelian concepts is not here an example of any tendency to exalt human logic over against the Bible but, on the contrary, of his desire to be faithful to the Bible. Nevertheless, he does remain vulnerable to the criticism that his belief that there is such a necessary connection between God's being and his effects, and that this is indeed a valid way of understanding the Bible's relationship to God, is an assumption that he nowhere feels obliged to justify.

A second element in his use of Thomist patterns of thought is his reliance on analogical predication. Right at the very start of the work, Owen defines how words can be predicated of God. Discussing how definitions of justice are used by non-Christian philosophers in discussions about civil administration and government, he points out how such concepts are to be understood of God: "[I]n ascribing the perfection of excellencies to him [God], we exclude the ratio of habit or quality, properly so called, and every material and imperfect mode of operation."³⁷ Thus, when speaking of God, it is quite legitimate to apply to him human concepts of perfection, providing that we understand such predication is analogical and that these perfections, as they exist in God, have none of our creaturely limitations and imperfections. Thus, the works of secular thinkers on perfection and virtue in the realm of creation become, *mutatis mutandis*, useful for gaining insights into the nature of God. This is a somewhat broader application of philosophical concepts to theology than that based on analogical reasoning from biblical texts and does appear to open the way for a more purely philosophical approach to God based on the analogy of finite being in general to the infinite being of God. This is, of course, strongly suggestive of the influence of Thomistic patterns of thought upon Owen.³⁸

This notion of analogy is, of course, useful both for asserting and for denying arguments based on natural theology. As in the above example, Owen can use it to legitimize use of secular philosophy in supporting his notion of justice. However, he can also deploy it as a way of delimiting natural theology when it suits his cause. For example, faced with Twisse's argument

³⁷ Ibid., 10:558-59.

³⁸ At one point when he is using analogical reasoning, Owen does explicitly acknowledge the influence of Aquinas. This is in the context of a discussion concerning how the idea of anger can be applied to God. Owen cites with approval Aquinas' view as expressed in *Summa* 1a2ae 47.1: See *Works*, 10:544. Regarding the scholastic framework employed by those orthodox divines maintaining the opposite position on the atonement's necessity to that of Owen, it is interesting, though perhaps hardly surprising, that William Twisse's use of Aristotle is shaped by Scotistic, rather than Thomistic concerns: See S. Hutton, "Thomas Jackson, Oxford Platonist, and William Twisse, Aristotelian," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39 (1978), 635-52, esp. 649ff.

that, as humans can forgive sin without retribution or satisfaction, then so can God, Owen denies that such reasoning is legitimate.

[D]ivine and human forgiveness are plainly of a different kind. The forgiveness of a man only respects the *hurt*; the forgiveness of God respects the guilt. Man pardons sins so far as any particular injury hath been done himself; God pardons sin as the good of the universe is injured.³⁹

In this case, where the argument from analogy appears to be going against him, Owen is careful to stress that God's forgiveness is fundamentally different from that of humans. This would seem to imply that Owen's attitude toward natural theology is inconsistent, but this is not so. While analogy presupposes difference, it also requires similarity. What Owen is doing here is denying that there is any similarity between the actions of private individuals and those of God. He is not denying the usefulness of analogy in general. As this passage continues, he returns to a positive reliance on analogy by arguing that God must not be compared in this context with a private individual but with a civil official: A private person is free to forgive an injury, but a magistrate is bound by his office to punish; thus, God, by definition ruler of the universe, cannot pardon sin either.

Of course, the epistemological reliability of the analogy of being depends entirely on the doctrine of God. As was noted earlier, Owen's understanding of God is defined by his belief that God's works are determined by his intellect apprehending the good and his will moving toward it. This is an essential aspect of his nature and marks a clear departure from Owen's earlier voluntarist understanding of God.⁴⁰ It is also true that God is the only necessary being: He necessarily wills himself in his trinitarian form.⁴¹ By implication, therefore, he also wills his own happiness. The logical priority of intellect to will imposes ontological limits on God's external acts. Goodness and happiness are not arbitrarily dependent on God's will but rooted in his own

³⁹ *Works*, 10:588.

⁴⁰ See *Ibid.*, 10:510. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.21.1.

⁴¹ "[God is] necessary in respect of all his actions internally, or in respect of the persons in the Godhead toward one another. The Father necessarily begets the Son, and loves himself. As to these and such like actions, he is of all necessary agents the most necessary." *Works*, 10:510. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.21.1.

unchanging being. It is this intellectualist view of God that both ensures the objective reliability of natural theology and precludes any notion of sin's going unpunished. In a passionate passage close to the end of the treatise, Owen makes it quite clear that sin can only be properly understood in its relationship to God.

Sin opposes the divine nature and existence; it is enmity against God, and is not an idle enemy; it has even engaged in a mortal war with the attributes of God. He would not be God if he did not avenge, by the punishment of the guilty, his own injury. He hath often and heavily complained in his word, that by sin he is robbed of his glory and honor, affronted, exposed to calumny and blasphemy; that neither his holiness, nor his justice, nor name, nor right, nor dominion, is preserved pure and untainted: for he hath created all things for his own glory, and it belongs to the natural right of God to preserve that glory entire by the subjection of all his creatures, in their proper stations, to himself.⁴²

Sin must, therefore, be understood from a theocentric, rather than anthropocentric, perspective, and its punishment must be seen as part of God's overall purposes. As God's primary act is to will his own happiness, his own glory, then all secondary, external acts must conform to this. Sin is, by definition, the contradiction of God, a denial of God's own willing of his own essential glory. As such, God cannot be indifferent to it: The punishment of sin is demanded by the fact that he wills the good, which requires him to act in such a way that his purposes are not frustrated.⁴³ As sin represents the creature's attempts to be free of God, so punishment of sin becomes the only way in which God is able to reassert his authority and so to maintain the proper order of being that, creation being presupposed, is a necessary part of God's glory and happiness.

As with his use of analogy, Owen's intellectualist doctrine of God shows clear affinities with Thomistic theology. This, of course, raises the question of the sources of his thinking. The *Dissertation* is explicitly dependent on scholastic writers at a number of points, particularly in

⁴² Ibid., 10:619.

⁴³ "[T]he infliction of punishment belongs not to God as injured...but as he is the ruler of all and the judge of sinners, to whom it belongs to preserve the *good of the whole*, and the dependence of his creatures on himself." *Works*, 10:567.

the early chapters.⁴⁴ This is hardly surprising, as the debate as a whole can be seen as another example of the periodic battles between intellectualists and voluntarists that had started in the Middle Ages. In the light of his obvious intellectualism, it is not insignificant, nor indeed surprising, that Owen feels able to draw positively upon Aristotle, Thomas, and the later Aristotelian, Suarez, to support his argument. While Owen is careful to distance himself from these individuals both in terms of content and method, it is quite clear that he is happy to use Thomist and Aristotelian patterns in his theology. This fact, perhaps somewhat ironically, brings his argument very close in terms of content, especially as regards its foundation in an intellectualist understanding of God, to the position of one for whom Owen usually reserved the greatest scorn: Jacob Arminius. This points us once again to the complexity of the historical development of Reformed theology, a complexity that defies any attempt at explanation in terms of simplistic models and categories.⁴⁵

Conclusion: Owen's Christocentrism

It has become the vogue for scholars of Reformed thought to see a fundamental antithesis between Christ-centered theology and the presuppositions and methods of an Aristotelian conditioned scholasticism. In the main, this is no doubt the result of an uncritical and unhistorical acceptance of Barth's belligerent *Nein!* to natural theology, even by those scholars who do not adopt his positive theological constructions.

While the whole notion of judging Reformed scholasticism by the criteria of twentieth-century theology of any variety, be it neoorthodoxy or conservative Calvinism, is highly dubious, historical analysis of the relevant documents demonstrates that many of contemporary scholarship's dearest shibboleths are unsustainable in the light of the evidence. Owen's treatment of divine justice is a case in point. Here is a theologian guilty of all the worst sins: positive use of Aristotelian categories; a disposition towards scholastic distinctions and methods of argumentation; and, worst of all, a dependence on the analogy of being, that mark of Barth's

⁴⁴ E.g., *Works*, 10:497 [Aristotle], 501 [Lombard, Aquinas, Cajetan, Biel, and others], 505 [Aquinas, Cajetan]. On p. 502, Owen explicitly agrees with Suarez on the formal inherence of punitive justice in God, but, without being specific, does distance himself from his method: "His conclusions here I do not oppose, though I cannot approve of many of his reasonings and arguments."

⁴⁵ Further parallels between the arguments of Owen and Arminius on divine justice can be found by comparing Owen's arguments in his *Dissertation* about the priority of the divine intellect with those in Arminius' *Diputatio Privata* 21, *Opera Theologica*, 360-62.

antichrist. The result, one would imagine, should be a theology that, on this issue at least, is arguably not less christocentric than those of Owen's opponents, including Calvin himself, but actually more so.

In asserting the necessity of Christ's sacrifice, Owen is presenting a Reformed theology that cannot displace the historical person of the mediator from the center of the drama of redemption. There can be no eternal justification based purely on the decree: Salvation is as surely linked to history as it is to eternity. It is those who predicate the necessity of incarnation and atonement solely on the decretive will of God who run the risk of marginalizing the historical person of Christ and undermining the importance of salvation history. In this context, Owen's scholasticism serves not to eclipse Christ but to place him at the center. Indeed, as is clear from his argument, if it was not for his Thomist understanding of God's causal relationship to creation and his acceptance of the validity of the analogy of being, Owen would have no way of attacking his opponents' position. While it is true that his use of such arguments depends on assumptions that he does not justify, it is also true that any rejection of their validity renders his christocentrism epistemologically unsustainable. In the context of this dispute, at least, it is the rejection of natural theology, not its acceptance, that is the enemy of Christ-centered theology.

This is not to say that Owen's position is correct or in any way superior to those of his opponents. It is merely to point out that in the seventeenth century, use of scholastic argumentation, and even of the analogy of being, did not necessarily disrupt the Christological focus of Reformed theology but could in fact be used to strengthen it. Just as scholasticism should be regarded as a method rather than a result, so Owen's use of Aristotelian philosophy and natural theology should not be prejudged by anachronistic criteria but should be seen as a means rather than an end in itself.

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