
John Owen

Progressive Presbyterian?

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PART TWO

Continued from page 13 of Part 1 in BRJ No. 16.

Owenian ecclesiology is (like all Owenian theology) *Biblical*, that is, Owen is an independent scholar of Scripture, with the very highest regard for the regulative authority of the Bible. He takes his understanding directly from the Scripture, and allows no man, or Synod or Confession to stand between him and his interface with the Word. Here (I suggest) is the true key to understanding John Owen the theologian, and interpreting his thinking on any subject he tackles — his *Independency* is *not at the level of church-government* at all, but is an *independency of thought*, a noble discharge of conscience answerable only to God, and an acute awareness of great mental power which made him unwilling to defer to the opinions of other (and ‘lesser’) men. The clue to the mystery of Owen’s assumed move away from Presbyterianism, then back towards it again, is simply this- the ‘move’ was never a ‘forensic’ change of opinion on the technical subject of church polity, but an *intellectual* drift from the genius of Presbyterianism, leading him to be a man on his own (*homo sui generis*), and hence to be naturally classified among the Independents. I identify the ‘genius’ of Presbyterianism as this; within it’s joint rule by representative elders there is a *voluntary subordination* of the one to the many. This is no mere numerical majority ‘vote’, but a willing acceptance of the plain fact that the understanding and insights that God grants to any man are less than those granted to a group of godly men collectively. Hence the individual elder voluntarily subordinates his own view to that of the majority (recognising the broader pool of wisdom). In extraordinary cases he might record a dissent, which ‘discharges his conscience’, and then quietly leave the outcome to God in submission to the majority. This humble and voluntary submission was alien to Owen’s character. Possibly disenchanted with the attainments of some of the men he might need to defer to presbyterially, aware of his own great intellect and understanding- he recognises no superior wisdom to his own between him and the Almighty. A victim of his own

genius, Owen simply had not the character to be a consistent presbyterian. He would rather stand as a minority of one than allow anyone else's experience of God and the working of the Spirit to modify his own independently thrashed out opinions. It is thus no surprise to find a uniquely Owenian ecclesiology, which defies all attempts to classify it in the recognisable terminology of on-going denominations, or to see puzzled commentators talking of flux and reflux, of change and re-change because the Owenian ecclesiology impinges now on this system, now on that one. But that specifically Owenian factor, as we have seen, operates within an overwhelmingly 'presbyterian' framework.

And there we might close, having analysed the thought of Owen, the real man in his own historical and theological setting. Which would leave him where we encountered him- safely within his brackets [John Owen, 1616-1683] three centuries ago. But the Church is a living entity, her interface with the world, her witness to, and representation of, her living Lord knows no pause. Her search for understanding, her battle against defection and backsliding must be constant and tireless. Never reaching perfection in this world, the reformed Church must ever be alert- and ever reforming. If Owen was an 'independent' by default rather than by conviction, if his deep Biblical learning and insights took him so far in the direction of Presbyterianism, if some of the remaining differences developed during his long career (in reaction to his experience of the Presbyterianism- and Presbyterians-of his day) if, as we have suggested, a dynamic, flexible-within-it's-divine-right-structure form of Presbyterianism *might and should* have comprehended Owen (and Bunyan?), if the exciting presbyterian experiment froze and fossilised around 1662 (when exploring and applying the whole Bible to church organisation came to an abrupt halt, and instead the church found herself fighting for her very survival) then it is hardly surprising that later Presbyterians commented that their system has never yet achieved it's full potential. In Britain the long struggle that led to the 'Disruption' of 1843 and the formation of the Free Church of Scotland brought many minds to the study of presbyterian polity again, and realise the fact that many things had not been settled, and that very different interpretations and practical out-workings of 'Presbyterianism' were possible. David King in his classic "Exposition and Defence of the Presbyterian Form of Church Government" (1853) says, "From the title of this volume the reader will be prepared to find that I take decided views, and vindicate one system of polity in preference to others. It does not follow that I advocate *an existing Presbyterianism* unqualifiedly and indiscriminately". At much the same time men on each side (or caught in the middle) of a great debate within American Presbyterianism commented that it was "strange" that in their day so much heat was raised over the question, "What *is* Presbyterianism?" Had not the foundations been laid long ago? Why fight again about *basics*? The big-name protagonists were Breckinridge and Thornwell contra Smyth and Hodge, and later Dabney against Hodge, and the difference hardened (at least partially) into the dis-

tinctive polities of the Northern (P.C.U.S.A.) and Southern (P.C.U.S.) denominations. From our perspective we should now begin to be able to see that it was not strange but inevitable, simply because there were unresolved issues and tensions, and an aborted learning curve, leading to a semi-crippled Presbyterianism creeping out of the killing-times, rigidly excluding many of the elements that might have produced her true strength and flexibility on the one hand, whilst allowing an amazing latitude *within her borders* on the other. And here I suggest another proposition: that the men and ideas which were excluded were rejected *because they sought a Jus Divinum, Bible-regulated system of polity*. Conversely those who would not trouble the church with a divine-right government, or too much 'regulative principle' in practice became the leaders who took the church into a 'liberal' polity (even when still soundly Calvinistic in doctrine) which *has made both a modified-congregationalism and a modified-episcopacy the accepted 'norm' in much latter day (conservative and reformed) Presbyterianism*.

By this rule John Owen was too much a presbyterian, too 'high' a presbyterian, whilst many who are classified as 'presbyterian leaders' were 'low' if not 'no' Presbyterians at all!

Let us illustrate the point by briefly contrasting the teaching of John Owen (the 'Independent') with Charles Hodge (the 'Presbyterian'), on the vital subject of the place and authority of the 'ruling elder' in the Christian church. We have seen that Owen goes to great (that is, Owenian!) lengths to vindicate the Jus Divinum necessity for a plurality of elders (teaching and ruling) in the local Church ('True Nature of a Gospel Church' Second part, 1689, Caps.7; 'Of the Rule of the Church, or of Ruling Elders', & 8; 'The nature of Church Polity or Rule, with the duty of Elders'). Says Owen; "The rule and government of the church, or *the execution of the authority of Christ* therein, is in the hand of elders. All elders in office have rule, and none have rule in the Church but elders. As such, rule doth belong unto them. The Apostles, by virtue of their special office, were intrusted with all church-power, but therefore they were elders also, 1 Pet.5:1, 2 John 1, 3 John 1. See Acts 21:18, 1 Tim 5:17. There are some of them, on other accounts, called 'bishops, pastors, teachers, ministers, guides', but what belongs unto any one of them in point of rule, or what interest they have therein, it belongs unto them as elders, and not otherwise, Acts 20:17,28" (p.106). "There is no mention in Scripture, no mention in antiquity, of any church wherein there were not more elders than one; nor doth that church answer the original pattern where it is otherwise" (p.113).

Ruling elders are ordained, and are not laymen: "In the Church of England there is a peculiar distribution made of the 'keys'...such as Chancellors, who were never ordained, separated, or dedicated unto any office in the Church. These Chancellors are the *only lay elders* I know anywhere in the church; that is, persons intrusted with the rule of the church who are not ordained"(p.107).

To see how 'presbyterian' these statements are simply re-translate the word 'elder' to it's Greek equivalent, 'presbyter'; "The rule and government of the church is in

the hands of PRESBYTERS. All PRESBYTERS in office have rule, and none have rule in the church but PRESBYTERS. The Apostles were intrusted with church power, but were PRESBYTERS also. There is no mention in Scripture, no mention in antiquity, of any church wherein were not more PRESBYTERS than one.” (And , insists Owen, *all Presbyters are ordained.*)

Compare the Presbyterian leader Charles Hodge; “Our form of government groups elders and deacons together, provides for the ordination of the minister by laying on of hands of the Presbytery, and on the other hand directs that a single minister shall set apart an elder or deacon indifferently to either office, by the proposition of a list of questions, by the vote of the people to be represented, and by prayer.”²⁰ Now ‘elders’ (ruling) have moved away from ‘pastors’ (elders, teaching) and are placed on a par with deacons. The teaching elder alone is a presbyter and a ‘clergyman’ (a term Hodge seems to have been very fond of), ruling elders are ‘lay elders’, ‘representatives of the people’; laymen who can be called to service, not by ordination by the laying on of the hands of the Presbytery, but by the mere act of a single ‘clerical’ elder. But since when did the Presbyterian form of government do any such thing? Earlier we mentioned the importance of terminology, and cautioned against ‘antics with semantics’, and above we employed the device of simply transposing the Greek ‘presbyter’ for the English ‘elder’; it’s direct translation— with illuminating results in our assessment of Owen’s real ‘Presbyterianism’. *It is a common device to confuse issues by making a word in one language carry a new and different signification from it’s real equivalent in another, even when one purports to be a simple translation of the original.* Apply the same simple test to Hodge, as above, and we get; “Our form of government groups PRESBYTERS and deacons together, provides for the ordination of the minister by the laying on of the hands of the ELDERSHIP, and on the other hand directs that a single minister shall set apart a PRESBYTER or deacon indifferently to either office...” Hardly the results Hodge would have desired. Yet as ‘elder’ and ‘presbyter’ are direct translations of each other, the *terms should be absolutely interchangeable, without affecting the meaning of the text in any way!*

John Owen is consistent in this. Charles Hodge is not. Hodge builds an edifice of doctrine and practice by the device of separating an English term from it’s Greek original, and then moves the English version into a totally different sphere, on the ‘wrong’ side of his lay/cleric divide, from it’s proper Greek original! A simple re-translation makes linguistic nonsense of Hodge’s ecclesiology. What is more, despite his repeated claims that his is the true and genuine Presbyterianism, we find him searching around for ‘allies’ to support his theory. Hodge’s ecclesiology is summed up in his controversial “What is Presbyterianism” article of 1855. Of this and it’s expansion as “Church Polity” he tells his readers that it met with “*emphatic approbation by the strictest Presbyterians of Scotland*”²¹ Hodge is here blatant -

20. ‘The Life of Charles Hodge’, D.D. by his son, Alexander Hodge, D.D.’ London, 1881, p.420.

21. Ibid. p.421,

ly claiming that his 'elders and deacons as laymen' theory is original Presbyterianism, and that the 'best' Scottish theologians, (recently deeply involved in Church theory through the 'ten years struggle,' the disruption crisis) 'emphatically' agreed that he was right. In fact the 'strictest Presbyterians' he refers to were the new Free Church, and that as represented by the famed William Cunningham, who visited America (and especially Princeton) on behalf of that new communion, and developed a life-long correspondence with (and admiration for) Hodge as a result. As correspondence is a two-way matter, we will glimpse at what Cunningham has to say about this. It is this; "I have never been able to make up my mind fully as to the precise grounds on which the office and functions of the ruling elder ought to be maintained and defended. For some time before I went to America I had come to lean pretty strongly to the view that *all ecclesiastical office-bearers were presbyters*, and that there were sufficiently clear indications in Scripture that there were two distinct classes of *these presbyters*, viz. *ministers and ruling elders*...this fairly implies that wherever presbyters or bishops are spoken of in Scripture *ruling elders are included*."²² Cunningham's exhaustive study of Presbyterian polity (Scottish) led him to see that all office-bearers were presbyters or bishops- ruling elders included. But note the little phrase here; "*before I went to America*". That is, before *he came into contact with Hodge!* It is hardly surprising that Hodge's novel (to him) theory somewhat startled Cunningham, and drove him back to the Scriptures. That is right and good. But where are the grounds for the claim made above by Hodge? Surely this is disingenuous to say the least? In fact we intend to show that Hodge's view was not really so novel at all, that it had a history of its own, a strand or thread going back to the Westminster Assembly itself, and that Hodge was right in this at least; that the difference takes us to the very heart of what Presbytery is really all about. For the present it should suffice to ask which teaching relies more on Scripture, and which more on sophistry, whilst we begin to see why Hodge's ecclesiology was called "no, no, no Presbyterianism" by Thornwell, whilst Thornwell's *Jus Divinum* understanding (which owes a lot to John Owen, as any glance at the references cited by Thornwell will show) was castigated by Hodge, "high, high, high, Presbyterianism."

Our concern here is that it is basically Hodge's version of Presbyterianism which has been the norm in most continuing Presbyterian denominations around the world. Hodge argues for a system in which the teaching elder or pastor (minister) is the only real presbyter. Any 'elders' are layfolks who he calls to assist him. They represent the laity, he the ministry. Apart from the invidious creation of a radical clerical/ lay divide, with the plain suggestion that each need their own representatives to fight their corner against the vested interests of the other (hardly a pattern the New Testament would recognise!) we are left asking the plain and simple question: *-If that is the case where is the PRESBYTERY in the local Church?* Of course, on

22. Letter from William Cunningham to Charles Hodge, July, 1844.

Hodge's plan (and in many professing Presbyterian churches today) there *ISN'T ONE!* Now this needs emphasis and reiteration. The local congregation has a pastor, and he alone is a cleric, a presbyter. He may have assistance from lay 'officers' but they are non-ordained, and constitute 'his' session, and 'his deacons', whilst he controls and oversees them. *The local church (according to Hodge and most 'presbyterian' practice) is NOT PRESBYTERIAN AT ALL, because it has NO PRESBYTERY.* When the minister meets his co-equal ministerial brethren from other congregations *they* constitute a presbytery for the joint governance of their churches. And for that reason it has been traditional in presbyterian literature to call the local meeting (otherwise the Classis) uniquely *the presbytery*; Kirk Session, PRESBYTERY, Synod, General Assembly. Back in his Church the Hodgian pastor reigns in sole glory- the only 'true' or 'real' presbyter there, a pope in his own little Vatican. Here is a clericalism that rivals episcopacy, added to a local church situation which is plain Independence, with a (clerical) Presbyterianism superadded *at the higher levels.* And this is exactly what the original framers of Westminster Presbyterianism laboured to prevent, when they stressed the absolute necessity of *congregational presbyteries!* Compare the following; "What probability or possibility of tyranny is the presbyterial government? Who should tyrannise? Not the Ministers for...they are counterpoised in all Assemblies with a plurality of Ruling Elders, it being studiously provided that there are always two Ruling Elders to one Minister." 23 Surely it is Hodge's view which is a serious modification of Presbyterian theory. Let it be refuted by our consistent presbyterian thinker, John Owen; "Where there is but one elder in a church, there cannot be an *eldership* or *presbytery*, as there cannot be a senate where there is but one senator; which is contrary unto 1 Tim.4:14" (op.cit. p.113). Nor is it the 'original intent' of Scottish Presbyterianism; "1.The word Elder, in the Scriptures, sometimes is the name of age, sometimes of office. 2. When it is the name of an office, sometimes it is taken largely, comprehending as well the pastors and doctors as those who are commonly called seniors or elders. 3. In this division we call these elders, whom the Apostles call presidents or governors. 4. Their office, as it is ordinary, so it is perpetual, and always necessary in the Kirk of God. 5. The eldership is a Spiritual function, as is the ministry. 6. Elders once lawfully called to the office, and having gifts of God meet to exercise the same, may not leave it again. 7. Such number of elders may be chosen in certain congregations, that one part of them may relieve another for a reasonable space, as among the Levites under the law, in serving the Temple. 8. The numbers of elders in every congregation cannot be well limited, but should be according to the bounds and necessities of the people. 9. It is not necessary that all elders be also teachers of the word, but they ought chiefly to be such, and so are worthy of double honour.10. What manner of persons they ought to be we refer to the express word, and namely the canons written by the Apostles. 11. Their office is, as well separately as conjointly, to watch diligently upon the flock committed to

23. 'Jus Divinum', Preface, p. xliv.

their charge, both publicly and privately, that no corruption of religion or manners enter therein. 12. As pastors and doctors should be diligent in teaching and sowing the word, so the elders should be careful in seeking the fruit of the same in the people. 13. It appertains to them to assist the pastor in examining those who come to the Lord's table, and in visiting the sick. 14. They should be careful to cause the acts of Assemblies, as well particular as provincial and general, to be put into execution. 15. They should be diligent in admonishing all men of their duties, according to the rule of the evangel. 16. Things that they cannot correct by private admonition, they should bring to the assembly of the eldership. 17. Their principle office is, to hold assemblies with the pastors and doctors (who are also of their number), for establishing of good order and execution of discipline, unto which assemblies all persons are subject that remain within their bounds," and; "Elderships and assemblies are constituted of pastors, doctors, and such as commonly we call elders, that labour not in the word and doctrine, of whom, and of whose separate power, has been spoken" ('Heads and Conclusions of the Policy of the Kirk', also known as the 'Second Book of Discipline', 1578). Original Presbyterianism (if we may call it that), and Owen and Thornwell (representing, shall we say, *progressive* Presbyterianism) says that pastors and doctors are *of the number* of elders. Elders are responsible for seeing that the acts of assemblies are implemented by their churches. They watch over the flock (sheep watching over fellow sheep Dr. Hodge?), they examine those seeking access to the table. What is more- they are ordained to office- *for life!* Again we ask; is Owen 1650-60s or Hodge 1850-60s nearer to the original intent of Biblical Presbyterianism? Is it Hodge- or Owen-who stands nearest to John Knox? *Who now is the presbyterian?*

How stands the Hodgian theory in relation to the Westminster Standards?

Hodge- "Our form of government groups elders and deacons together.....(op.cit.)"

Westminster- "The Scripture doth hold out deacons *as distinct officers* in the church ('The Form of Presbyterian Church Government' 1644).

Hodge- "Ministers are ordained by the laying on of hands of the (classical) presbytery. (op.cit.)."

Westminster- "The Scripture doth hold out a presbytery *in a church*, which *presbytery* consisteth of ministers of the word, and those other church officers who are to join with the ministers in the government of the church ('A Directory for Church-Government, for Church Censures and Ordination of Ministers, Agreed upon by the Assembly of Divines,' 1645.)

Could there be a more direct contradiction of original Scottish Presbyterianism, or of the Westminster Standards in the vital matter of the officers of the church than the teaching of Charles Hodge? Yet Hodge was never disciplined for non-adherence to the Standards. Hodge is still seen as the great Presbyterian divine and ecclesiastic, the non-pareil exponent of Presbyterian polity, and his modification of Presbyterianism has been the version which has almost exclusively claimed the

name from his day onwards (and was probably the mental starting point from which the reader thought of Presbyterianism, when we began to consider old John Owen, that notorious 'Independent'!)

Just one more reference here; we have said that Scottish Presbyterianism came to Westminster with a history of *practical application*, and of the give-and-take experience of the actual workings of the system for the best part of a century. Within that period English Presbyterianism had been in opposition, in waiting, and had been able to major on *theory*. The original intent of this (Cartwright, Pendry, Travers, Deering) stream of English presbyterian thinking, as it flowed into the melting pot of Westminster, is best seen in the 'Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici' or 'Divine Right of Church Government' prepared by the London Presbyterian Ministers in 1646. The very title of their work shows their belief in a God-ordained form of church government, laid down in the word (or by just and necessary inference deducible therefrom), with the implications a) that the Reformed church will constantly seek not *for* but *within* that Jus Divinum, to fine-tune her polity and practice according to the Word, and b) that wilful departure from that pattern is *sinful*. That, and that alone, is the 'regulative principle!' Now compare Charles Hodge, the great exemplar of Presbyterianism 'as we know it'; "The New Testament does not prescribe in detail any precise form of church organisation, nor can any existing ecclesiastical organisation claim divine authority..."²⁴

To disentangle the threads of ecclesiastical thinking and politics in the Church of three centuries ago is a near impossible task, but it is one which we cannot, dare not, ignore if we are to avoid making the same costly mistakes over again. Once more the church faces a critical period in her history, darker and more distressing in many ways than that of the 1640s. (Who would not prefer active persecution to scornful indifference?) And where, oh where, are the likes of the Westminster Divines, or of John Owen, to lead us out of it? If we fail to learn from them, we have no-one (on earth) to teach us at all.

Our initial question; 'Was John Owen a Presbyterian?' has resolved itself into another (allied and preliminary) one, it is rather 'What is Presbyterianism?'

Amongst those threads there is one we have not looked at, but which is an essential ingredient in the mix. We have said that there was a long history of theoretical and 'opposition pressure-group' Presbyterianism in England, and that some fine and Biblical thinking on Church government was carried out by them²⁵, culminating both in the classic 'Smectymnuus' and 'Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici' and their contribution to the Westminster Standards and Directories. But what of the mass of other English 'clergy'; men who had no strong 'divine right' principles, but who were willing to study and discuss the issues at Westminster, and enter into a presbyterian settlement. Did they not come out of Anglican episcopacy? Had they

24. 'The Life of Charles Hodge', op.cit. p.419.

25. e.g. Thomas Cartwright, 'A Full and Plain Declaration of Ecclesiastical Discipline out of the Word of God'. 1574.

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not been nurtured on their dignity, authority and rights as 'clergymen'? Willing to be freed from the regimen of diocesan Bishops and Archbishops above them, would they be equally willing to allow a co-equality to men who they had always been taught were beneath them? Is it likely? An interesting insight is afforded us here by John Lightfoot, whose 'Journals' record some of the debates at the Assembly. The rights of the people in the election of their ministers had been fully maintained in all the English presbyterian polities before Westminster, but at that Assembly; "Some of the English Presbyterians had been led to entertain views of the rights of the Christian people in the appointment of their ministers of a somewhat more narrow and illiberal cast than had ever been sanctioned by the Reformers, or countenanced by the Church of Scotland. Travers and Cartwright, two of the ablest and most learned men among the early English Presbyterians, held the right of the people to choose their own ministers. The five distinguished divines who, in 1641, published the celebrated work usually called *Smectymnuus*, all of whom were members of the Westminster Assembly, also maintained the right of people to choose their own ministers. At the same time it is plain from Lightfoot's account, as well as other sources, that there were some members of the Assembly who did not hold, in a strict and proper sense, the necessity of the people's consent, and who seem to have been disposed to give to church courts a power to disregard their opposition if they thought the reasons ill-founded. Nothing like this had ever been maintained by Presbyterian divines, and the fact that it appeared at this time among some English Presbyterians is to be explained by a very peculiar combination of causes,—namely, first, their Episcopalian education; secondly, a tendency to lean to the opposite extreme rather than even appear to countenance anything like Independency; and thirdly, the very anomalous and distracted state of the community at this time."²⁶ Note very carefully this major strand at Westminster; 'convenience Presbyterians' (many of whom would go back into restoration Anglicanism in 1660-62), influenced by 1) *Episcopalian Education*, and 2) a fear of anything that even *looked like independency*. As they laboured to preserve their 'clerical' dignity and standing over the people, in the question of who they should admit into their ranks, can we imagine that they would also allow those ranks to be swelled by ruling elders—non 'professional' presbyters? Or would they resist and push down the ruling elders into the ranks of the 'laymen'? We then reach another conclusion; *the 'three-office' view is a modified episcopacy*, introduced by the semi-reformed ex-Anglicans at Westminster. To illustrate:-

EPISCOPACY

Bishop (Diocesan)
Priest (Presbyter)
Deacon (Lowest rank of 'clergy').

SEMI-PRESBYTERIANISM

Bishop (Congregational)
Elder (lay 'helper')
Deacon (lay 'helper')

²⁶ Lightfoot, 'Journals' in 'Works', Vol.13, p.231-3, quoted by William Cunningham in 'Discussions of Church Principles', (1863) 1991 pps 392-3.

This is antithetical to 'original intent' Presbyterianism (Scottish and English). Yet it has (via the powerful advocacy of Hodge and others) become the prevailing 'orthodoxy'. It is allied with a tendency to deny any 'divine right' in the Presbyterian system. This is the prelatice-presbyterian mix which failed (refused) to comprehend John Owen in the seventeenth century (and so forced him into practical, and later modified-theoretical, Independency). It has been the cause of weakness and division in the Presbyterian community ever since. This has been repeatedly recognised and combated (Thornwell, Palmer et al). As a result a) much that is and has gone by the title of Presbyterian has no right to the designation (in terms of original intent), and b) the Presbyterian system has failed to achieve anything like it's due power, authority, majesty or potential.

And there we conclude. Our assessment is that 'original intent' Presbyterianism, flexible and progressive within its Biblical parameters of Divine Right, could and should have comprehended John Owen, as well as John Bunyan. Later it would have added George Whitefield to its galaxy of 'greats'. But a modified Episcopacy crept in at Westminster, kept Owen and others out (forcing them into more extreme dissenting positions) and left a crippled Presbyterianism as a result. When these forces abandoned Presbyterianism and returned to their native Episcopalianism at the restoration the damage was done, many naturally 'presbyterian' strands had learned to grow and develop *outside* the root that should have been bearing and nourishing them, and the Presbyterianism which emerged (particularly in America) was one denomination among many, instead of being the sole, plain, Biblical orthodoxy. It was narrow and strict where it ought to have been comprehensive and flexible, and it was liberal and tolerant, where it should have been forceful and uncompromising. It developed eloquent and persuasive apologists for clerical dignity and in support of its modified episcopacy. It arrogated to itself almost solely the title of 'Presbyterianism'. It has produced endless divisions and tensions because it fails to solve the basic questions of the place and rights of the people (intrusion, patronage, representation), and perpetuates an unnatural clergy-people divide. Aware that this mixed and continually shifting system can hardly claim to be of Divine right, it has settled for being 'one denominational stance' among the many. Since Westminster, (more so since Hodge) it stopped holding up a banner and saying "we have the Bible on our side- *join us!*" It excluded it's own great minds and great leaders. John Owen was a Presbyterian- but Presbyterianism failed to accommodate his peculiar genius. In that Presbyterianism failed to be worthy of John Owen.

And, brethren, *this is important*, if we seriously see ourselves as called to work for a renewed Reformed Church and polity in our day. If we are to learn from the past, we cannot leave Owen and Bunyan and their kind in dusty antiquity, or treat them as subjects for interesting historical and ecclesiastical studies. They are speaking to us, teaching us- and the sermon must have it's application!

Stephen Westcott, BRISTOL, June 1996
