

FORUM : *Response*

Concluded from Issue No. 13

John Owen RE-PRESBYTERIANIZED

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The Presbytery and the two dozen Elders in the Trinity's Book of Revelation

In Rev. 1:10-20 & 2:1 to 3:20f, one finds a beautiful picture of Presbyterian Church Government. For there, seven different Congregations reflecting the Triune God Himself (Rev. 1:4-6) are organically and indissolubly conjoined within the same Presbytery — as seven different Branches of one and the same golden Candlestick. Cf. Ex. 25:31-40 & 37:17f.

Dr. John Owen too (XV:512) saw that “all Christians were *originally* of *one mind...unto joint communion.... The discipline of the Church...consists in the due exercise of that authority and power which the Lord Christ...hath granted unto the Church for its continuance, increase and preservation in...order and holiness according to his appointment.... Rev. 2 : 2, 20.”*

In Rev. 4:4f (cf. 5:8-14) the Apostle John saw in heaven “four and twenty seats [or thrones], and upon the seats...four and twenty Elders sitting.” Now here, the New Testament Greek has θρονους εικοσι τεσσαρας Πρεσβυτερους καθημενους— where θρονους means “**thrones**” and Πρεσβυτερους means “**Elders**”, and καθημενους means “**thoroughly seated**” (alias ‘**in Session**’). The Vulgate here has *sedilia* (which means “**seats**”) and *Seniores* (which means “**Senators**”). In Rev. 11:16f, the twenty-four “Elders...sat before God on their seats.” Here, the New Testament Greek has Πρεσβυτεροι οι ενωπιον του Θεου καθημενοι επι τους θρονους αυτων-- where Πρεσβυτεροι means “**Elders**” and where καθημενοι means “**thoroughly seated**” and θρονους means “**thrones.**” The Vulgate here has *Seniores* (which means “**Senators**” alias “**Elders**”) and *sedent in sedibus suis* which means (“**sat in their seats**”). Cf. too also Rev. 19:4f.

In Rev. 21:12-14f (cf. 4:4-11 & 5:8-14 & 19:4), it is made plain that the names of the twelve Tribes of Israel (cf. their Provincial Assemblies) and the names of the twelve Apostles (cf. their General Assembly or Synod) are both equally written on the gates and foundations of the City of God called ‘**New Jerusalem.**’ This shows that Christ’s Biblical Church is grounded in both the Older Testament represented by the twelve Patriarchs and the Newer Testament represented by the twelve

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Apostles — and further reflected by the twenty-four **Elders** of the **Presbyterian Church of all ages** (B.C. 4004 till A.D. 1995f).

Finally, in 22:16f (cf. 1:12-20 & 2:1 to 3:22), Jesus testifies of these things in **all of the Congregations in His Presbyterian Church**. He then adds that no man may add to His book (as does the non-presbyterial Romish Church with her vain traditions), and that no man may take away from His book (as do the congregationalistic sects of Dispensationalists which take away the Old Testament foundation from the government of the New Testament Church).

Owen before Parliament: “I plead for Presbyterial Government in Churches!”

It must of course be remembered that practically throughout the Westminster Assembly — of which he himself was not a member, Owen was still a Presbyterian and not yet a Congregationalist. Thus on 29th April 1646 he proclaimed (VIII:26-52) to the Parliament of England:

“In the very morning of the gospel, the Sun of righteousness shone upon this land; and they say the first potentate on the Earth that owned it, was in Britain.... God will again water his garden, once more purge his vineyard, once more of his own accord He will take England upon liking.... **I plead for Presbyterial Government in Churches....**

“We judge it needless to express ourselves...unless to such as shall be so simple or malicious as to ask whether this way be that of the Presbyterians or Independents.... Civil divisions of men that may conveniently **be taught by one Pastor and ruled by Elders...as Presbyterians esteem them...receive no injury, nor are abridged of any of their privileges.**”

Owen’s later editor, W.H. Goold, was himself sympathetic to Congregationalism. So it is not surprising that Goold here says (VIII:2) of Owen: “There can be no doubt...that he was at this time undergoing the change of view which led him in the end to profess Congregationalism” alias (sic) “Independency.”

Had the Presbyterian Government been settled in 1660 — Owen “not concerned”

According to Goold, Owen was “led...in the end to...Congregationalism.”

Yet according to actual fact, at the end of his life Owen seems rather to have been led — back to the Presbyterianism of his earlier days. For during his turbulent years, he had become increasingly disillusioned with Congregationalism. Hence the episcopalian Anglican Dr. Stillingfleet not inappropriately asked, after the 1660 enthronement in England of Charles II: “Hath Dr Owen yielded, that...if **Presbytery** [rather than Episcopalianism] had been settled upon the king’s restoration — would they [Owen’s Congregationalists]...have continued in their separation?”

To this, the decongregationalizing and represbyterianizing Owen responded (XV:432f): “Had the **Presbyterian Government** been settled at the king’s restoration, by the encouragement and protection of the practice of it, without a rigorous imposition of everything supposed by any to belong thereunto, or a mixture of human constitutions, if there had any appearance of a schism or separation continued between the parties—I do judge they [**Congregationalism and Presbyterianism**] would have been both to blame” had they “continued in their separation.” For, Owen adds: “It would have been a matter of no great art absolutely to unite them.... If it shall be asked, then, Why did they not formerly agree in the [Westminster] Assembly? I answer, (1) I was none of them, and cannot tell; (2) They did agree, in my judgment, well enough.... **I am not concerned in the difference.**”

The functions of Elders in Owen’s own 1667 Short Catechism

Owen’s famous *Short Catechism* was published in 1667. About this, his later editor Goold very truthfully wrote: “Certain principles laid down in Owen’s *Catechism*, in regard to the Ruling Elder for example, are thought to bear some traces of affinity with Presbyterianism.... There might be ground for supposing that, on terms suggested by the *Catechism*, a coalition might be effected between the two denominations.” See Owen’s Works, XV:446.

Here, Goold was quite right. For, after dealing with the duties of Pastors alias *Ministers of the Word and Sacraments* “to preach the Word” and “to administer all the ordinances” — Owen, in that same *Catechism*, had gone on to ask (XV:499f): “**Wherein principally doth the authority of the Elders of the Church consist?**” He answers by citing: “Acts xx.28; Heb. xiii.7,17; I Pet. v.2; I Cor. xii.28; I Tim. iii.5; Col. iv.17; 2 Cor. x.4,8; I Tim. iv.11; Titus ii.15; I Pet. v.2-5. Then he adds some very telling words.

“The means whereby the Lord Christ communicates this power unto men,” explains Owen (as clearly as one might possibly wish), “is by his law and constitution...exercised in his Church...by such and such persons.... Matt. xvi:19; xviii:17-20.... The way, then, whereby the Elders of the Church do come to participate of the power and authority which Christ hath appointed to be exercised in his Church — is by their and the Church’s due observance of the rules and laws given by Him for their election and setting apart unto that Office. Heb. v: 4,5 Acts xiv.23.”

Significantly, precisely that last text records the **appointment** of Elders specifically by representatives of the **Presbytery** (after their prior **election** by the **Congregation** but only at the instance of the Leaders of the Apostolic Church as such). Acts 13 : 1-5 & 14:23-27 and cf. 6:1-6.

Owen says (XV:501 f) “the reason therefore why the *consent* of the Church is required unto the authoritative acting of the Elders therein is not because from thence any authority doth accrue unto them anew which virtually and radically they had not before, but because by the rule of the gospel this is required to the **orderly**

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acting of their power... If it be asked 'What then shall the Elders do in case the Church refuse to consent unto such acts as are indeed according to rule and warranted by the institution of Christ?' — it is answered, that they are....

"1. Diligently to *instruct* them from the Word in their duty.... 2. To declare unto them the *danger* of their dissent.... 3. To *wait patiently* for the...giving [of] light and **obedience** unto the Church; and 4, In case of the Church's continuance in any failure of duty, to seek for advice and *counsel* from the Elders and brethren of **other Churches.**"

Then, Owen further asks (XV:528f): "*Wherein consists the duty of any Church of Christ towards other Churches?*" Dr. Owen's answer includes also the following duties: "**communicating supplies...Acts xi-29-30**"; "**receiving** with love and **readiness** the **members** of them into **fellowship**...Rom. xvi.1-2; 3 John 8-9"; and "making **use** of their **counsel**...Acts xv: 2,6."

Very significantly, the above-mentioned Acts 11:29 records donations being sent to the Elders of the Jerusalem Presbytery superintending many thousands of Christians within that region. Again, the above-mentioned passage Rom. 16:1f records the commendation of Phoebe, from the Congregation of Cenchrea in the Presbytery of Corinth, to the various House-Congregations within the Presbytery of Rome (Rom. 16: 5-15). Indeed, the above-mentioned text Acts 15:2-6 records the beginning of the deliberations of the General Assembly in Jerusalem, in answer to its receipt of the reference from the Presbytery of Antioch, just prior to its formulation of binding decrees to be kept by "the Churches" in all of "the cities" of Antioch and Cilicia and Syria where Congregations had been established. Acts 13:1f; 14:23-27; 15:1-41; 16:4-5.

Owen states (XV:530) "it follows that in case **any** Church [singular]...do give offence unto other Churches [plural], those other Churches may **require an account** from them; **admonish** them of their faults; and **withhold communion** from them in case they persist in the error of their way.... Hence also it follows that those that are rightly and justly **censured** — in **any** Church [singular] — ought to be rejected by all Churches [plural] whatever...because of their **mutual communion**.... In case there had been any difficulty or doubt in the procedure of the Church [singular], they would have taken the advice of these Churches [plural] with whom they were **obliged** to consult."

The final re-presbyterian-ization of Rev. Dr. John Owen

Presbyterian Baxter was so impressed by words like these in Owen's Catechism, that he wrote to him — proposing union between the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians. To that, Dr. Owen himself replied (I:cix-cxxi) — "**I judge your proposals worthy of great consideration**.... I see no reason why all the true disciples of Christ might not, upon these and the like principles, condescend in love unto the

practical concord and agreement — which not one of them dare deny to be their duty to aim at.”

There is evidence that Owen (Works XVI:2) even told a person of quality, and others, that he could readily join with Presbytery as it was exercised in Scotland. Moreover, the historian Wodrow (in his own 1716 *Analecta*) records: “Mr George Redpath told me...that he visited Dr Owen on his deathbed, and Presbytery and Episcopacy came to be discoursed of....The Doctor said how he had seen his mistake as to the Independent way, and declared to him a day or two before his death that after his utmost search into the Scriptures and antiquity, he was now satisfied that Presbytery was the way Christ had appointed in His New Testament Church.”

Owen’s posthumously-printed True Nature of a Gospel Church and its Government

Owen died in 1683. One of his most important tracts, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church and its Government*, was published posthumously six years later in 1689. Rightly, the later **congregationalistic editor W.H.Goold** admitted in his own ‘Prefatory Note’ thereto (XVI:2) that because “of some statements in the following treatise...**it has been gravely argued that the author returned to the Presbyterianism of his early days before he died.**” Those statements are found especially in Owen’s chapter on ‘the Communion of Churches’, from which we now quote at some length.

“This Communion,” insists Owen (XVI:183), is **incumbent** on every church with respect unto all **other** Churches of Christ in the world equally.” Apparently thinking of I Cor. 12:3-26 (especially verse 13) and Eph. 4:1-16 (especially verse 5), Owen emphasised (XVI:189f) “that the true and **only union of all particular Churches consists in that which gives form, life and being unto the Church Catholic....** They have all one and the same God and Father; one Lord Jesus Christ; one faith and one doctrine of faith; one hope of their calling or the promised inheritance; one regeneration; one baptism; one bread and wine — and are united unto God and Christ in one Spirit....

“Two things concur,” explains Owen, “unto the completing of this Union of Churches: **1.** Their *union* or *relation* unto Christ; **2.** That which they have *among themselves*...The Lord Christ Himself is the *original and spring* of this **Union**, and every particular Church is united unto Him as its Head; besides which, with, or under which, it hath none. This relation of the Church unto Christ as its Head, the Apostle expressly affirms to be the foundation and cause of its Union. Eph iv:15-16

“**The Communion of Churches,**” Owen goes on, “*is their joint acting in the same gospel duties towards God in Christ, with their mutual acting towards each other with respect unto the end of their institution and being, which is the glory of Christ in the edification of the whole Catholic Church....*”

“Churches have Communion unto their mutual edification by advice in Synods

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or Councils.... *SYNODS are the meetings of divers Churches by their [commissioned] messengers or delegates, to consult and determine of such things as are of common concernment unto them all — by virtue of their Communion which is exercised in them....*

“The union of all churches as before described — *in one Head, by one Spirit, through one faith and worship, unto the same ends — doth so compact them into one Body Mystical, as that none of them is or can be complete absolutely without a joint acting with other Members of the same Body.... This acting in Synods is an institution of Jesus Christ..... in the nature of the thing itself, fortified with apostolical example.* For having erected such a Church-state and disposed all His Churches into such **order and mutual relation** unto one another as that none of them can be complete or discharge their whole **duty** without **mutual** advice and **counsel** — He hath thereby ordained this **way** of their communion in **Synods**, no other being possible unto that end....

Owen's final words as to why Synods of Elders are necessary

Says Owen (XVI:197f & XVI:205f): **Synods** are consecrated unto the use of the Church of all ages by the example of the Apostles in their guidance of the first Churches of Jews and Gentiles; *which hath the force of a divine institution*, as being given by them under the infallible conduct of the Holy Ghost. Acts xvi....

“Hence it is evident what are the ends of such Synods among the Churches of Christ. The general end of them all, is to promote the edification of the whole Body or Church Catholic; and that: (1) To **prevent divisions** from differences if in judgment and practice, which are contrary thereunto. The **first Christian Synod** was an Assembly of the first [or foremost] two Churches in the world, by their Delegates. The first Church of the Jews was at Jerusalem, and the first Church of the Gentiles was at Antioch; to prevent divisions and to preserve communion between them was the first **Synod** celebrated, Acts xv. (2) To avoid or cure offences against mutual love among them. (3) To advance the light of the gospel by a **joint confession and agreement** in the faith. (4) To give a **concurrent testimony against pernicious heresies or error**, whereby the faith of any is overthrown, or in danger so to be. (5) To **relieve** such by advice, as may be by any Diotrephes unduly cast out of the Church [III John 1-10f]....

“There is a threefold **power** ascribed unto **Synods**. The first is *declarative*, consisting in an **authoritative** teaching and declaring the mind of God in the Scripture; the second is *constitutive*, appointing and **ordaining** things to be believed or done and observed by and **upon its own authority**; and thirdly, *executive*, in acts of **jurisdiction towards persons and Churches....**

“The **power** of a **Synod** for the execution of its decrees respects either: (1) The things or **doctrine declared...on its authority** from the presence of Christ; or (2)

persons to censure, **excommunicate** or **punish** those who receive them not.... The authority of a Synod declaring the mind of God from the Scripture in doctrine, or giving **counsel as unto practice synodically**, unto them whose proper **representatives** are **present in it** — whose **decrees** and determinations are to be **received** and **submitted** unto, on the evidence of their **truth** and **necessity**, as recommended by the **authority** of the Synod from the promised **presence of Christ** among **them**, is suitable unto the mind of Christ and the **example given by the Apostles**. Acts xv....

“Hence it will follow that a **Synod convened in the Name of Christ**, by the voluntary consent of **several Churches** concerned in **Mutual Communion**, may **declare** and **determine** of the mind of the Holy Ghost in the Scripture, and decree the observation of things true and **necessary**, because revealed and appointed in the Scripture; which are to be **received**, owned, and **observed** on the evidence of the mind of the Holy Ghost in them, **and** on the ministerial authority of the **Synod itself**.* ”

Thus the life and death and writings of Great Britain’s greatest of all ‘Congregationalist’ theologians - the decongregationalizing and repressbyterianizing Dr. John Owen. Congregationalists, congregationalist Baptists, and all so-called ‘Independent Bible Churches’ (sic) and Christian House-Churches worldwide - need to be moved to follow in his faithful footsteps.

For, as the Presbyterian Rev. Dr. Owen points out in what very many regard as the greatest commentary ever written on a single book of the Bible - his own *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (11 : 1-14) - it is precisely by faith that the first Πρεσβυτεροι obtained a good report. By faith, Presbyterian Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than does the non-presbyter Cain. Abel, being dead, yet keeps on speaking. So too does Presbyterian Owen.

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We are specially grateful to Professor Lee for sending in such a full and detailed response as this to our Forum. Actually, there is even more material than we have printed, plus further exegesis concerning “Elders”. Considerations of space have prevented us from printing the full response, but we are hopeful that the Professor will publish the complete material soon as a book.

Editor.