

John Owen, the Holy Spirit, and True Christian Experience

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[May]...The Father of Glory...give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know...what is the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe... - Eph. 1:17-19, ESV

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Introduction: Experience: the Food of All Grace

Christology must shape the experiences as well as the minds of believers. What believers should know and understand about Christ is revealed clearly by God in Holy Scripture, and this should be useful in bringing change to hearts and minds by the power of the Holy Spirit. There should be a concern in the Christian life for both doctrine and life.¹ Experience is good if it is shaped and formed by Christology, and enjoyed within the boundaries of what Holy Scripture teaches.

For Puritan John Owen (1616-1683), experience was an important part of what it meant to be a Christian and to share in the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In Owen's important work on sanctification, he gives believers a memorable way to think about their experiential growth in grace by the Holy Spirit when he wrote:

Experience is the food of all grace, which it grows and thrives upon.Every taste that faith obtains of divine love and grace, or how gracious the Lord is, adds to its measure and stature.²

Owen asserted confidently of God's comfort to the believer through experience: "...Give unto a soul an experience, a taste, of the love and grace of God in Christ Jesus, and be its condition what it will, it cannot refuse to be comforted".³ Owen wrote this way particularly as a caring and compassionate pastor-theologian who vehemently desired for God's people to thrive in the divine love and grace of God.⁴ He knew that if believers tasted that the Lord was good experientially, then their faith would grow. Owen, from his own spiritual experience, was convinced that many professing believers did not truly

¹ Professor Kelly Kapic wrote that John Owen's theological work on the Spirit is "Christologically grounded and experientially sensitive". Quoted in *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2007), 198.

² John Owen, *Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *The Works of John Owen, D.D.* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), III:390.

³ Kelly M. Kapic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 55.

⁴ The language of thriving and flourishing is often used in Owen's works, especially to combat believers' proclivity to experience spiritual declension because of lack of watchfulness. See particularly Owen, *Works*, Vols. I:432-36, III:238-42.

possess spiritual life, and that many who did indeed possess spiritual life, had not reached assurance of faith as weak believers.⁵ Because of this, Owen accentuated the difference between having a mere notional, intellectual, or “head” knowledge of spiritual reality, and the reality within one’s heart:

Let us not rest in any apprehensions of truth whose efficacy we have no experience of in our hearts...To be spiritually minded is, not to have the notion and knowledge of spiritual things in our minds; it is not to...abound...in the performance of duties...It is to have our minds really exercised with delight about heavenly things, the things that are above, especially Christ himself as at the right hand of God.⁶

Further, Owen wrote pastorally in “Discourse IV” of a sermon answering the question “How may we recover from a decay of the principle of grace?”:

A man hears a good word of truth, and, instead of taking the power of it into his heart, he takes the notion of it into his mind, and is satisfied therewith. But this is not the way to thrive. God grant that we may never preach to you anything but what we may labor to have an experience of the power of it in our own hearts, and to profit ourselves by the word wherewith we design to profit others!⁷

This particular and unique pastoral emphasis of Owen that focuses on man’s experience of divine truth has been cleverly characterized by Owen scholar Kelly Kapic as “anthroposensitive”. Owen’s anthroposensitivity stressed a God-centered theological method that also involved the believer’s faith and experience, yet without being characterized as man-centered.⁸ In other words, in Owen’s mind and practice, the

⁵ John Owen, “The Strength of Faith,” from *Posthumous Sermons*, in *Works*, IX:9. Owen wrote with pastoral realism: “...A little faith will carry a man as safely to heaven, though not so comfortably, nor so fruitfully, as a great faith...Men may be true believers, and yet not strong believers.” See also Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 99-100.

⁶ John Owen, *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, in *Works*, VII:114, 348. Owen wrote “Much notional knowledge of the doctrines of the scripture is useless if it does not form Christ in the soul, and transform the whole person into his likeness and image...It is learning the truth as it is in Jesus, which alone renew with the image of God in us”; quoted Kapic, *Communion with God*, 73 (from Owen, *Works*, I:84).

⁷ John Owen, “Several Practical Cases of Conscience Resolved,” from *Posthumous Sermons*, in *Works*, IX:372.

⁸ Kapic, *Communion with God*, 55.

discipline and practice of doing any theology, either as a formal discipline, or as an individual believer learning the scriptures devotionally as a disciple, should always be particularly a *practical* and *useful* theology.⁹ Professor Kopic defines Owen's anthroposensitivity as "a refusal to divorce theological considerations from practical, human application, since theological reflections are always interwoven with anthropological concerns....Theological reflections must entail anthropological implications..."¹⁰ This refusal to divorce theological considerations from practical human application is exemplified in Owen's work on the Holy Spirit in volumes III and IV of His *Works* where Owen claims that what made the discourses longer than he expected was that he desired pastorally to seek to apply the truths from Scripture to believer's hearts, and includes what he called a "continual intermixture of practical applications which runs along them all".¹¹ Believers ought to desire to mature. Believers should not be those who are described in scripture as "always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth," nor those who have a "form of godliness, but deny its power" (2 Tim. 3:5-8).

⁹ Kelly Kopic says "Owen demonstrates a reciprocal relationship between theology and practice, experience and doctrine." Kopic, *Communion with God*, 66. Although "anthroposensitive" has been recently coined, the characteristic of what it seeks to recognize in Owen has been observed for some time in the twentieth century. In a profile written in 1963 about John Owen, Professor Godfrey Vose wrote similarly, "For Owen, believers must inwardly appropriate the doctrinal truths we profess. In studying the experiential side of doctrine, Owen's emphasis was always Godward. Christian experience was the experience of God the Holy Spirit within the arena of the human soul". Godfrey Noel Vose, "Profile of A Puritan: John Owen (1616-1683)," PhD diss., Iowa State University, 1963, 153.

¹⁰ Kopic, *Communion with God*, 33

¹¹ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:9. Also, Pastor Owen informed readers in his preface of *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, in *Works*, Vol. VII, Owen wrote that he desired to impart the truths of how to mediate upon spiritual matters and raise up men's minds to heaven, because he had a real experience of these truths: "To impart those truths of whose power I hope I have had in some measure a real experience, and to press those duties...Are the things which I would principally apply myself unto in the work of teaching others". Owen wrote that having an experience of the truth that he taught was one thing that regulated his teaching others. Owen desired to know experientially what he was teaching others to know and expect experientially. J. I. Packer wrote, "[Owen} made this rule as a pastoral theologian: "I hold myself bound in conscience and in honour, not even to imagine that I have attained a proper knowledge of any one article of truth, much less to publish it, unless through the Holy Spirit I have had such a taste of it, in its spiritual sense, that I may be able, from the heart, to say with the psalmist, 'I have believed, and therefore have I spoken'." J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 193-94; quoted from Owen, in *Works* XVI:76, X:488.

John Owen: An Anthroposensitive, Reformed Catholic, Spiritual, Puritan, and Biblical Theologian

In the history of the church, there have been errors regarding the truth and experience. Some have accentuated the importance of understanding and knowing Scripture, but have lacked true, spiritual experience (such as the Rationalists, and some Roman Catholics, and members of the national church of John Owen's day).¹² Some emphasized experience, while forsaking the importance of a well-informed mind, and the need of an educated clergy to teach Holy Scripture to God's people making "way unto all folly and villainy", "satanical delusions, [and to] open a door to enthusiasms," as Owen put it describing those such as the "Ranters", or the Quakers and Quietists of his day.¹³

The Puritans generally, and John Owen particularly, stressed the importance of the subjective soul responding to God's objective word of revelation in his word by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Puritans generally, and John Owen in particular were affectionate, or "affective" theologians of God's word that stressed the experiential side

¹² Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, in *Works*, VI:19.

¹³ Owen, *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:13. See also, Owen, *A Defense of Sacred Scripture Against Modern Fanaticism* in *Biblical Theology* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996), 769-92. Who were "The Enthusiasts", or what is enthusiasm? David Lovejoy in *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World*, wrote "Enthusiasm has a pejorative connotation--to damn religious extremists--who step across Orthodox lines and claimed a close, warm emotional relationship with God." (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press), 198, 1. He wrote further that Enthusiasts often believed they were returning to, or restoring primitive, biblical Christianity (Lovejoy, 2-3). Enthusiasts had a focus on a personal relationship with God and the Holy Spirit, but not anchored in Holy Scripture (Lovejoy, 13-16). Enthusiasts believed that they were closely in touch with God through personal revelation and were guided in all things by the light of the spirit within them (Lovejoy, 111). Some of the Enthusiasts were also called "Ranters" and Quakers. George Fox, the founder of Quakers taught that Quakers looked inward for Christian truth that God revealed to them directly. Fox read the Bible only to discover and its pages truths he claimed to know experimentally (Lovejoy, 111-112). Fox was described as arrogant, the light of Christ was in them so they denied outward help from scripture, books, teaching, professional clergy (Lovejoy, 112). They were described as those so "full of the Spirit" they sometimes were unable to contain themselves (Lovejoy, 113; also Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, 160-61). Ranters and Quakers were described as having an "uncontrolled subjectivity". They were opposite on the spectrum from Calvinism at its most "meticulously intellectual" (Watkins, 32-34). The enthusiasts credited their knowledge as a direct witness of the Spirit apart from Scripture. Faith became largely a matter of feeling (Watkins, 90). Subjectivism characterized the Enthusiasts, linked with an "ultra-supernaturalism" where the initiative of the Holy Spirit superseded human reason and will in everything. Individualism was promoted opposing established human institutions, all anti-intellectual, and all claiming the immediate authority of the Spirit (Watkins, 90).

of Christianity.¹⁴ In fact, historian Charles Hambrick-Stowe wrote, "At its heart...Puritanism was a devotional movement, rooted in religious experience....Puritanism was as affective as it was rational..."¹⁵ Jerald C. Brauer noted that it was the experiential nature of Puritanism which caused it to emphasize the work of the Spirit to a degree unparalleled in church history.¹⁶ Owen in his emphasis on experiencing the Spirit of God, was not only living as a Puritan of his time, but also as a Reformed catholic theologian building importantly upon what John Calvin (1509-1564), almost one hundred years prior, had taught in His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* about the "cross-centered life" in his Book III on sanctification and experiencing the Holy Spirit's work in the Christian life.¹⁷ John Calvin, who had been very indebted to Bernard of Clairvaux and other church fathers (1090-1153), sought to emphasize the importance of the experiential side of Christianity.¹⁸

¹⁴ David M. King, "The Affective Spirituality of John Owen," *Evangelical Quarterly* 68:3 (1996):223-33. Also, Mark E. Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Macon, GA: Mercer Press, 2000), 135-37; Michael A. G. Haykin, "The Calvin of England: Some Aspects of the Life of John Owen (1616-1683) and his Teaching on Biblical Piety," *Reformed Baptist Theological Review*, 1, No. 2 (July 2004), 169-83.

¹⁵ Charles Hambrick Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Practices in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982), vi, viii; quoted in King, 'Affective Spirituality'.

¹⁶ Jerald C. Brauer, "Reflections on the Nature of Puritanism," *Church History* XXIII:2 (June 1954), 102; quoted in King, 'Affective Spirituality', 232-33.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XX* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), Vol. 1, 3.1.1 –Vol. 2, 3.15.12.

¹⁸ Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark LTD, 1999), 99-110. Scholars have noted that an interest in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and a "fresh conviction of its [sic] centrality for Christian faith and experience, are characteristics of the Reformation" and that the "Puritans did not ignore the inheritance of catholic spirituality," but "understood the heights and depths, the light and darkness of spiritual religion". See Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), 4; Gordon S. Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion: Its Place in the Development of Christian Piety* (London: Epworth Press, 1957), 108. Wakefield wrote further, "[The Puritans] knew that the dark night of the soul is not mere fantasy of mystical mania, but an experience which most mature Christians may be called upon to share with the Lord Jesus Christ....But the passionate yearning for Christ is a yearning also for Heaven, where He is all in all, and clouds and darkness are fled away, and obedience is perfected."

I. Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit: The Source of the Spirit and True Christian Experience

John Owen was a faithful biblical, pastoral theologian, as well as a spiritual catholic theologian, and a true heir of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century. As a Puritan, Owen was profoundly and robustly first a theologian of the Holy Spirit. John Owen's theology of true Christian experience is based upon his Christology, and a biblical Christology that emphasized the Holy Spirit and His ministry as particularly the "Spirit of Christ" in the lives of believers united to Jesus Christ (cf. Rom. 8).¹⁹ Owen's tremendously useful undertaking on the *Work and Ministry of the Holy Spirit* in volumes III and IV of his momentous and exhaustive theological 'Works' testify to the importance of Owen stressing the experience to be had in the Christian life of that truth that the Holy Spirit has been gracious to give in Holy Scripture.²⁰ It is extremely difficult to overestimate the importance of the Holy Spirit in Owen's thinking. It is generally agreed that he exceeded others, even most Puritans, in writing of the Holy Spirit and His influence.²¹ Owen has even been described as a "pioneer in biblical pneumatology."²² Owen's work *On the Holy Spirit* was a massive undertaking, that Owen himself thought was a first of its kind.²³

Owen taught that only by the Holy Spirit acting upon believers can they do any good at all before God. He said the believer's constant and continual prayer should to be acted

¹⁹ Professor Kapic wrote, "From conception to ascension, Owen highlights the work of the Spirit in the life of Christ". *Communion with God*, 85.

²⁰ In the Gould edition of Owen's works there are almost 1200 pages for volumes III and IV on the Holy Spirit.

²¹ Vose, "Profile of a Puritan," 123, 179. Perhaps Richard Sibbes (1577-1635) comes a close second. See *Works of Richard Sibbes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust), 7 volumes; also Mark E. Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England*, Mercer University Press, 2000.

²² Michael A. G. Haykin, "The Calvin of England: Some Aspects of the Life of John Owen (1616-1683) and his Teaching on Biblical Piety," *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* Vol. 1 No. 2 (July 2004), 169-183), 174.

²³ Sinclair B. Ferguson, "John Owen on the Spirit in the life of Christ," *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, Issues 293-294 (Feb.-March 1988), accessed August 1, 2015, <http://www.puritansermons.com/banner/fergus01.htm>.

upon by the Spirit of God, and “enlivened by the grace of God, in all things we do”.²⁴ Owen argued that it is from the believers’ union with Christ that they possess the Spirit, and that this union makes them “spiritual” or “Holy Spiritual” in the sense that the Apostle Paul teaches in Romans 8:11.²⁵ Owen taught that the Holy Spirit unites Christ and His people,²⁶ causing them to participate in the divine nature.²⁷ This mystical or spiritual union is like the relationship and union of the head to the body,²⁸ and this brings life from Christ to make His disciples fruitful.²⁹

This important focus of Owen was to bring believer’s confidence in the transforming work of God through His Spirit. Believers were not to merely look to Christ for the Spirit as Mediator, but to Christ as an example of the man *par excellence* full of the Spirit as an example to how one should live life in the Spirit. The Spirit, from eternity past to the fullness of the time of the conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary, did support Christ in His fulfillment of the ministry through cross, resurrection and ascension to God’s right hand that had been given to Him by the Father.³⁰ The Spirit of God was experienced by the man Christ Jesus in every way.³¹ All works of the man Christ Jesus were “as a man”

²⁴ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:368.

²⁵ Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance Explained and Confirmed*, in *Works*, XI:332.

²⁶ Owen, *Posthumous Sermons*, in *Works*, XI:336.

²⁷ Owen, *Posthumous Sermons*, in *Works*, XI:337.

²⁸ Owen, *Posthumous Sermons*, in *Works*, XI:339.

²⁹ Owen, *Posthumous Sermons*, in *Works*, XI:340. Owen wrote that, “Both He and they [Jesus and His church] are partakers of the same fruit-bearing Spirit; He that dwells in them dwells in Him also; only it is in Him, as to them, originally, in them by communication from Him”. Owen, *Works*, XI:341.

³⁰ To stress the Triune God’s unified purpose in the salvation of the elect, yet the unique mission of love and grace that was granted to each Person of the Triune God, Owen focused on the Father’s electing love and grace, “[the Father’s] purpose, his design, are constantly proposed as the foundation of the whole work...” The Son undertook to complete and fulfill the mission that was granted Him by the Father, and the Father was involved in “sending, giving, appointing [Him]...in preparing him a body; in comforting and supporting Him; in rewarding and giving a people unto him...” The Son condescended, consented, and engages to accomplish the will of the Father. The Holy Spirit did immediately “work and effect whatever was to be done in reference unto the person of the Son or the sons of men, for the perfecting and accomplishment of the Father’s counsel and the Son’s work...” Here Owen emphasizes that unique work of the Son of God for the salvation of the elect, while preserving a great deal of similarity in the way of the Holy Spirit’s ministry upon Christ and His own. Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:159.

³¹ In Owen’s opening of “The Work of the Holy Spirit with Respect unto the Head of the New Creation-The Human Nature of Christ”, he summarized the work of the Holy Spirit in the work of New Creation by

through the immediate work of the Holy Spirit upon Him.³² In fact, the only immediate act of the Eternal Son on the human nature was His assumption of this created nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary at the time of His conception. The Spirit provided Jesus Christ with wisdom, revelation, understanding, faith, support in trials, peace in difficulties, strong endurance until the end as He relied upon the Spirit's work upon and within Him.³³ This special emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit is that the Spirit did not perform an "information or deity dump" into the soul or mind of the man Jesus Christ, but as a true man, Jesus of Nazareth, who was permanently united to deity, learned, and grew, and was made complete as a true man in dependence upon the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 2:40, 52; Heb. 5:7-9).³⁴ Owen desired to confess and articulate orthodox Christology,³⁵ but he also sought to emphasize very practically that Jesus Christ was the prototype of the believer's experience.³⁶ Although Jesus was sinless, and perfect in his human nature, he still had to be made complete. The Spirit helped Jesus to accomplish His work unto death that made Him complete as the "Life-Giving Spirit" (Heb. 5:6-8; 9:14; 1 Cor. 15:44-45). As Professor Kaptic writes,

[Owen] maintains that one cannot rightly understand the humanity of Jesus apart from the continuing work of the Spirit, who creates the human nature

distinguishing importantly and between Jesus, the Head of the Church, in His human nature, and the members of his mystical body. Under these two important headings Owen pens his theological thoughts on the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit. Owen, See *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:159.

³² Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:160. Owen wrote: "The only singular immediate act of the person of the Son on the human nature was the assumption of it into subsistence with himself." For further implications of this see Mark Jones, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Jesus Christ: An Introduction to Christology* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2012), 21-43, and Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 19-30.

³³ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:160.

³⁴ Owen wrote: "The human nature [of Christ]...however inconceivably advanced, is not the subject of infinite, essentially divine properties; and the actings of the Son of God towards it, consequential unto its assumption, and that indissoluble subsistence in its union which ensued thereon, are voluntary," *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:161; also III:170ff.

³⁵ Owen was building upon important established Chalcedonian and orthodox Christian Christological teachings about the Person and Work of Jesus Christ that sought to confess from the scriptures that the only Redeemer of God's elect is the man Christ Jesus, who being the Eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continues to be, God and man in one person and two distinct natures, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism succinctly summarizes.

³⁶ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:160ff.

and sustains Christ from the wilderness to the grave, ultimately raising him to the right hand of God. This same Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is now given to believers and in the Spirit's power Christians find life, strength, and hope as they are united to their exalted Savior.³⁷

From the framing, forming, and miraculous conception of the body of Christ in the womb of the Virgin Mary³⁸ to sanctifying or consecrating, and filling with grace Jesus Christ, according to the measure of its human receptivity,³⁹ to the grace given Him on His rational faculties and powers of His soul, his understanding, will, and affections, the Spirit was completing the work begun in the man Christ Jesus and preparing and equipping Him for ministry as the Second Adam and Redeemer of God's elect, "for he acted grace as a man".⁴⁰

By the Spirit of God, the Lord Jesus made progress in the "improvement and exercise of these faculties and powers of His soul," and he "made progress after the manner of other men, for He was made like unto us 'in all things,' yet without sin".⁴¹ Jesus Christ grew in grace and wisdom by the "peculiar work of the Holy Spirit"⁴² and "as the faculties of His mind were enlarged by degrees and strengthened, so the Holy Spirit filled them up with grace for actual obedience".⁴³ The wisdom and knowledge of Christ was "objectively increased", and in new trials and temptations he "experimentally [experientially] learned the new exercise of grace. And this was the constant work of the Holy Spirit in the human nature of Christ."⁴⁴ Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, was anointed with those extraordinary powers and gifts which were necessary for the exercise and

³⁷ Kavic, *Communion with God*, 88.

³⁸ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:162.

³⁹ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:168.

⁴⁰ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:169.

⁴¹ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:169.

⁴² Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:170.

⁴³ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:170.

⁴⁴ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:170.

discharging of his office on the earth.⁴⁵ The Spirit of God was conferred on the Lord Jesus Christ as a continued act, “in that He was given to Him to abide with Him, to rest upon Him, wherein there was a continuance of the love of God towards and His care over Him in His work”⁴⁶ Let us not miss these pastoral-theological, anthroposensitive implications. If Jesus Christ succeeded as the prototypical “believer”, or man of faith in ministry ultimately because of the Holy Spirit, then the Christian believer can be confident of such success as their experience as well. Owen summarized:

...And continually, upon all occasions, [the Spirit of God] gave out of his unsearchable treasures, grace for exercise in all duties and instances of it [to the man Christ Jesus]. From hence [Christ] habitually holy, and from hence did he exercise holiness entirely and universally in all things”.⁴⁷

John Owen sought to pastorally apply the Spirit’s work on Christ in order to inform and encourage believers that though sin remains, yet there can be the experience of flourishing holiness and grace in them.

Owen did make an important distinction between the Holy Spirit on Christ as a man, and the Holy Spirit on Christ as the Messiah the Christ in his office of Prophet, Priest, and King.⁴⁸ This important distinction was made by Owen to make a proper distinction between Christ Jesus’ unique dependence upon the Spirit, and His unique identity as the “only Redeemer of God’s elect”, and the similarity between Himself and other believers united to Him. This distinction can be helpful in appreciating the high expectations Christians may expect to flourish and thrive by the Spirit of God, in a similar way as Christ Jesus, as they struggle against sin and keep in step with God’s powerful Spirit. In fact, Owen wrote that because of this important biblical truth, believers should be

⁴⁵ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:171.

⁴⁶ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:173.

⁴⁷ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:170.

⁴⁸ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:183-88.

unspeakably encouraged or comforted and earnestly pray for conformity to Jesus Christ, and experience the power of a transformed life in sanctification, leading to admiration and praise of God's goodness:

And as it is a matter of unspeakable consolation unto us to consider what hath been done in and upon our nature by the application of the love and grace of God through His Spirit unto it; so it is of great advantage, in that it directs our faith and supplications [prayers] in our endeavors after conformity with Him."...What...in these matters we apprehend, we embrace [as believers]; and for the depth of them, they are the objects of our admiration and praise.⁴⁹

To put it as clearly as possible, John Owen taught that Christ's pattern of enjoying the experience of the Holy Spirit's ministry should also be the similar experience of believing Christians. Kelly Kapic said ,

If Christ is the one to whom believers must look, then just as the Holy Spirit supernaturally worked in Jesus's life, securing his entire sanctification, so will the Spirit of Christ working believers lives"....Owen consistently emphasized the relationship between Christ, the Spirit, and the believer.⁵⁰

Owen taught that the ministry and Person of Christ "was proposed unto [believers] in the Gospel as the great pattern or "an exemplar of holiness", to be a "means of the increase and growth" in believers.⁵¹ Concluding his chapter on the Spirit's work on the

⁴⁹ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:183.

⁵⁰ Kapic, *Communion with God*, 44. Note this pattern of experience especially for every minister of God's word; Owen wrote: "As Jesus Christ battled the evil one, resisted his temptations, depended upon God's Word, trusted in God and His Spirit to cause him to endure, he then came out of wilderness, led by the Spirit to preach in that same power of the Spirit in an experiential way. S. B. Ferguson asks: "...Why should this be so relevant to the continuing ministry of the Spirit?" Because our Lord Jesus Christ is the cause, source, and pattern of the Spirit's ministry in the believer. What he did in Jesus he seeks to do in us! In a word, Owen is saying: true humanity is true godliness; true holiness is true manliness or true womanliness!" Quoted in Ferguson, "John Owen on the Spirit in the life of Christ," accessed August 1, 2015, <http://www.puritansermons.com/banner/fergus01.htm>

⁵¹ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:511. Owen wrote: "Let us rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory in the grace of God that has been given to us in Christ Jesus! ...What we find in Christ will make our hearts leap within us, and all our affections will overflow with delight and joy. Holy admiration of God consists in our affections and emotions being touched experientially by His grace. We are not to have barren, fruitless, mere intellectual knowledge of Biblical truths, but we are rather to stir up our hearts in our meditations on the grace of God, and not rest until we find them affected, moved, satisfied, and filled with holy joy and contented resting in Jesus. This is the most eminent evidence of our union with Christ and His benefits" (O, Kindle [Loc. 56445](#)).

man Christ Jesus, Owen pastorally writes with eager expectations of what the Spirit will accomplish in the salvation of the elect:

We are to know Christ so as to labor after conformity unto him (Owen's emphasis). And this conformity consists only in a participation of those graces whose fullness dwells in Him. We can, therefore, no other way regularly press after it, but by an acquaintance with and due consideration of the work of the Spirit of God upon His human nature; which is therefore worthy of our most diligent inquiry into.⁵²

From focusing on the Spirit of God and His work on and in the human nature of Jesus, Owen naturally moves to focusing upon the believers' life in union with Christ. He opens his next section on the Holy Spirit "...with Respect unto the Members of that Body whereof Christ is the Head"⁵³ in this way:

...He who prepared, sanctified, and glorified the human nature, the natural body of Jesus Christ, the head of the church, hath undertaken to prepare, sanctify, and glorify his mystical body, or all the elect given unto him of the Father.⁵⁴

Jesus taught His disciples that they were to be fully dependent upon the power and support of the Holy Spirit alone as they sought to make faithful witness to His life, death, resurrection and ascension. The Lord Jesus in His enthronement and exaltation at God's right hand poured out the Spirit upon His Church to gift her, and to give her the same benefits that He experienced through the power of the Holy Spirit. By the power of the Holy Spirit, His disciples would be able to carry that testimony to the uttermost parts of the earth (cf. John 14-16; Acts 2:32ff). This was the foundational promise of the Spirit that would give the Church's ministry its power and efficacy.⁵⁵ Christ's bodily absence

⁵² Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:188.

⁵³ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:188.

⁵⁴ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:189.

⁵⁵ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:190-92.

was to be made present to His Church through his Holy Spirit. This is the primary teaching to comfort the hearts of all disciples from John chapters 14-16.⁵⁶ Owen wrote,

“Thus the Holy Spirit supplies the bodily absence of Jesus Christ, and effects what he hath to do and accomplish towards his [people] in the world; so that whatever is done by him, it is the same as if it were wrought immediately by the Lord Christ himself in his own person, whereby all his holy promises are fully accomplished towards them that believe”.⁵⁷

Owen wrote in his treatise on the *Perseverance of the Saints*, “...Both [Jesus] and [believers] are partakers of the same fruit-bearing Spirit; He that dwells in them dwells in Him also; only, it in Him, as to them, originally; in them by communication from Him”.⁵⁸ According to Owen, God sent His Son into the world, taking out nature upon Himself, in order that He might set an example of what the true man made in God’s image, unaffected and tainted by sin would look like. Owen wrote:

One end why God sent his Son to take our nature upon him, and to converse in the world therein, was, that he might set us an example in our own nature, in one who was like unto us in all things, sin only excepted, of that renovation of his image in us, of that return unto him from sin and apostasy, of that holy obedience which he requireth of us....To this end, therefore, among others, did God send his own Son to take our nature on him, and therein to represent unto us the perfect idea of that holiness and obedience which he requireth of us.⁵⁹

Jesus equips all of His people for service, and this should be an incentive to grow in our fellowship with the Holy Spirit. This experiential spiritual work of the Holy Spirit begins at the time of our regeneration, and continues throughout our Christian lives. It is true that Christ who has begun the good work in us by His Spirit will complete it (Phil. 1:6; Jude 24-25). In sanctification, the Spirit conforms the believer to Christ.

⁵⁶ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:195-97.

⁵⁷ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:193.

⁵⁸ John Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance Explained and Confirmed*, in *Works*, XI:341.

⁵⁹ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:510.

II. True Christian Experience by the Spirit: Salvation and Sanctification

How did Owen teach that the Spirit would be specifically involved in believer's experiences? First and foremost, it would be in sanctification. The Spirit would progressively conform the believer to Christ-likeness. A clear teaching of Scripture is that is the will of God for the believer to be sanctified (1 Thess. 4:3). Owen briefly defined sanctification as "the universal renovation of our natures by the Holy Spirit into the image of God, through Jesus Christ."⁶⁰ In sanctification, Owen stressed that the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life was the "immediate efficient cause of all gospel holiness."⁶¹ In His resurrection and ascension to God's right hand, Jesus Christ becomes an "endless, bottomless fountain of grace to all them that believe."⁶² To flourish and thrive was not merely a suggestion for a happy life according to Owen, although it would bring a happy life, it was the cure for hypocrisy, declensions in the soul, dullness in the affections, and the avoidance of apostasy. In other words, the safe life was a thriving and flourishing life that then made that safe and secure life happy in Jesus Christ.⁶³ Owen understood that all those united to Christ with the least amount of faith would get to heaven, but they would not get there necessarily happily. He wrote pastorally so that all believers might enjoy their pilgrimage, although it would be fraught with many dangers, toils, and snares. The stress for this holy and happy life was on the Holy Spirit given by Jesus Christ.

This was typical of the larger Puritan movement of which John Owen was a part in history. The Puritans in general always had a stress on the Holy Spirit in the sanctification of redeemed sinners. Theologian and pastor Derek Thomas wrote, "For the

⁶⁰ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:386.

⁶¹ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:523.

⁶² Owen, *On Communion with God*, in *Works*, II:68.

⁶³ Owen, *Works*, Vols. I:432-36, III:238-42; VII:112-13.

Puritans, “holiness in everything” sums up their mindset.”⁶⁴ Before the Puritans in the history of the church, there had been some in the church who emphasized the work of the Spirit of God, and experiencing His power, and were known as “mystics”. These “mystics” had emphasized experiences with the Spirit of God, bringing great power and joy in the Christian life that claimed to result in a deeper loss of self and deeper relationship with God. While Owen was in line with some of this thinking, he also was distinct from, and sought to emphasize a more biblical balance.

Some have gone so far as to characterize and call the Puritans as “mystics” because of their emphasis on the Holy Spirit and Christian experience.⁶⁵ In contrast to medieval mystics who stressed experiences with God, the Puritan's stressed the mystical union with God to motivate them to holiness. The teaching of the mystical union of the Spirit and believers for the Puritans was to biblically emphasize the importance of the transformed life being characterized by holiness and sanctification.⁶⁶ The Puritans generally, and John Owen particularly sought to see the church sanctified, flourishing and growing experientially for the glory of God as justified believers saved by grace alone through faith. Although they might have borrowed language from the mystics, they were different in their emphasis from the mystics of medieval Christian writers before

⁶⁴ J. R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas, *The Holy Spirit and Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 129. Prof. Thomas writes further: “[John Owen] wrote extensively about holiness because he practice it *himself*”, *ibid* 129.

⁶⁵ Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 2000), 135-137. Dever comments that the “affective” element in Puritanism has been characterized as “mysticism”, and he comments that scholars have found that this is an unhelpful term that is often misunderstood, and can practically apply to any Christian who said his prayers. This lack of an helpful definition in the term to describe the Puritans caused Dever to suggest “affective” as characterizing the Puritan’s spirituality and emphasis on the inner life of sanctification. Also Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion*, 108; also King, “The Affective Spirituality of John Owen,” 225-26, and Beeke and Thomas, *The Holy Spirit and Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books), 2013.

⁶⁶ David King wrote that Puritan mysticism focused on the immediacy of communion with God, and the importance of experiencing God's love in the Christian life. From “The Affective Spirituality of John Owen”, 225-26.

them.⁶⁷ For the Puritan then, while the experience was important, the service of the experience was always with an eye toward the glory of God, and the sanctification of the believer.

A. The Experiential, Sanctified, Spirit-Empowered, Mysticism of John Owen?

Perhaps a better way of speaking of the Puritan idea of mysticism would be to call it a “Sanctified, Spirit-empowered, Mysticism in union with Christ” with the purpose of glorifying God and for the enjoyment of the saint. The “sanctified” part of the description would place emphasis on the Christ-like internal work the Spirit desires to produce in the believer; the “Spirit-empowered” would emphasize that this is the initiated work of the Spirit, emphasizing that all good things come from the Spirit alone in fallen man; the “mysticism” would emphasize the subjective element, and that man is required to participate in, or be actively engaged and cooperative with the Spirit in keeping in step with Him (cf. Gal. 5:15-26).

Owen taught that as the Spirit created the body of Jesus to be indwelt by the Spirit, so He has created a mystical body to be united to Jesus and to be continued, preserved, and carried on to perfection with Christ, which was the work of sanctification.⁶⁸ Owen taught that because of man’s fallenness, that every good came from the work of the Holy Spirit. All grace and all of the gifts are given to the believer through their union with Jesus Christ: Owen wrote:

...There is no good communicated unto us from God, but it is bestowed on us or wrought in us by the Holy Ghost. No gift, no grace, no mercy, no privilege,

⁶⁷ Gordon Wakefield wrote: "The 'mystical union' of which the Puritans write is not the goal of the Christian life only, but its beginning. It may indeed be realized more by the believer as time goes on, but it is a part of justification. For the Puritan, the 'three ways' are not so much purgation, illumination, union, though these are very real elements of the Christian life, but justification, sanctification and glorification. Thus, when the Puritans borrow from Catholic or mystical writers, they make the expression serve the purpose of their own evangelical piety" in *Puritan Devotion*, 102-03.

⁶⁸ Owen, *Works*, III:367. Owen cites Col. 3:4; 1 Cor. 12:12; 1 Thess. 5:23-24, et al.

no consolation, do we receive, possess, or use, but it is wrought in us, collated on us, or manifested unto us, by him alone... There any good in us towards God, any faith, love, duty, obedience, but what is effectually wrought in us by him, by him alone; for "in us, that is, in our flesh" (and by nature we are but flesh), "there dwelleth no good thing." All these things are from him and by him...⁶⁹

Owen summarized sanctification or holiness as "nothing but the implanting, writing, and realizing of the gospel in our souls."⁷⁰ Owen always with an eye toward union with Christ asserted that there was not "the least dram of holiness, but what, flowing from Jesus Christ, is communicated by the Spirit, according to the truth and promise of the Gospel."⁷¹ God the Spirit works Christ-like conformity into the believer through experiences of the truth of God's Word. This causes believers to grow and thrive upon God. Once believers experience some growth in their daily conflict, love, practices, etc. they begin to grow in their trust of God and His Word. These experiences of the things believed cause the increase of faith and love in God. This increase of grace from from the Father, through the Lord Jesus, because of the power of the Holy Spirit was progressive throughout the Christian life (cf. Eph. 2:18). Owen wrote:

[The Spirit grows saints] by supplying believers with experiences of the truth, and reality, and excellency, of the things that are believed. Experience is the food of all grace, which it grows and thrives upon. Every taste that faith obtains of divine love and grace, or how gracious the Lord is, adds to its measure and stature.⁷²

Against the false teaching of antinomianism, Owen taught that the Christian has within her an "immortal seed" and that this "contains in it a living, growing principle" to produce good fruits for the glory of God.⁷³ Grace by the Holy Spirit was defined in this way as always growing, never dying, never declining. Owen was a spiritual realist who

⁶⁹ Owen, *Works*, III:157

⁷⁰ Owen, *Works*, III:370-71.

⁷¹ Owen, *Works*, III:371.

⁷² Owen, *Works*, III:390.

⁷³ Owen, *Works*, III:388; also III:214ff.

taught that the life of obedience would be hard at times as the believer trusts God by faith, especially in the mortification of believers' sins, but that the trajectory that the Spirit would give believers was one of growth, and desire to grow according to God's Word. One who never bore any fruit, nor had any conviction of disobedience, nor had desires to please God and love His commandments, should not claim to be truly Christian. Owen said that three duties are incumbent upon the believer to be watchful and careful over their souls. The believer is to cherish and preserve the beautiful grace that she has received, mortify all sins and lusts, as she lives in acts of holiness, righteousness, charity, and piety in the world, and to be thankful for all she has received.⁷⁴

According to Owen, there were three specific ways a believer could be aware that he was being sanctified and growing in grace. Because of constant powerful actings and continual influence from the Spirit of God upon the believer, the believer had acquired habits, or principles within them, that would cause them to produce specific, Christ-like fruits.⁷⁵ Owen says the believer would specifically manifest faithfulness, fruitfulness, and thankfulness in her life. These three attributes would help the unsure soul to have assurance of God's love and power upon them through the Spirit. The faithfulness would be revealed as a desire to live for God with the least amount of faith, and this would be cherished and preserved within the heart. Fruitfulness would be manifest in mortification of sins and sinful affections, living for God in acts of love and righteousness, and seeking to be more like Christ. Thankfulness would be the way

⁷⁴ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:482.

⁷⁵ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:475.

humility would be manifested as one lives out their lives for God in Christ by the power of the Spirit.⁷⁶

B. Regeneration: the Experience of a New Life

The Spirit starts the work of sanctification by transforming believers from within. Regeneration was just the beginning of the work of grace and power by the Spirit. Regeneration was for Owen a synonym for sanctification, or the beginning of the new world, or new life that had been implanted into the soul of the believer. John Owen taught that regeneration is merely the beginning of sanctification, and sanctification unto glorification is the perfection of regeneration. From the very beginning of the Christian life, a new life must be given from Christ to His people. The Spirit is the one who creates a new world. Just as He created a new Covenant Head of all humanity in the womb of the Virgin Mary, so in Him, he by the Spirit of God, creates a new world, a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) by bringing to life dead hearts, whereby He achieves the “communicating [of] a new principle of spiritual life unto the souls of the elect...this he doth in their regeneration”.⁷⁷

Owen emphasized against Socinianism and Arminianism that this work of the Spirit is monergistic. While the gracious and progressive work of sanctification calls the believer to be actively involved in the work of the Spirit, the work of regeneration finds the dead sinner in trespasses and sins, being acted upon simply by the powerful grace and life-giving power of the Spirit. The heart of man, the dead soul of the elect one is completely passive as the Spirit broods on the “face of the deep” and as He did over the darkness of

⁷⁶ Owen taught that an experience of faithfulness, fruitfulness, and thankfulness should encourage souls to more assurance, and this should heighten the sense of dependence upon God and his Spirit, and humble the soul to desire more. Yet in this humility, the turning of the self would be Christ-ward away from selfishness more and more, and desire to be like Him, as well as to be with Him in communion. This gratitude would be demonstrated in asking prayerfully for more of this same work in the fallen, yet redeemed heart of the believer. Owen summarized this in this way: “We are made like unto God, that we may live unto God”; summarized from Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:IV, Chap. 6.

⁷⁷ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:207, 220-22.

the womb of the Virgin Mary, and so broods over the dark hearts of the elect, bringing new light and life through His gracious ministry. Owen quoted the Lord Jesus in John 3 that this is being “born again” to a new life, it is “the Spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing” (John 3:3; 6:63).⁷⁸

In contrast to moralists of Owen’s day, Owen asserted that regeneration is an important Christian experience of the Spirit;⁷⁹ In fact, regeneration is the first real experience where actual change is made and the heart crosses from death to life.⁸⁰ Because regeneration is the first real Christian experience, it was more than a mere change in one’s life externally. In regeneration, there is much more than a mere change in behavior as the moralistic philosophers of history and his day articulated, there was a complete renovation of nature. Owen taught that the experience of a true believer who has been acted upon by the Holy Spirit has the infusion of a new and real spiritual principle into the soul. There is now spiritual life, light, holiness, and righteousness, enabling the believer to be obedient by God’s grace.⁸¹ The new creature is not merely “turning over a new leaf” because of a self-centered impulse to do or be better. Rather, the new creature’s faculties, dispositions and abilities have changed from within, from within the mind, will, and affections. The believer is now a partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).⁸² In contrast to the “rangers” or those who stressed enthusiastical raptures, voices from God, and ecstasies as signs of the regenerate life, Owen asserted that regeneration results in a transformed and changed life. Owen agreed that the subjective and experiential element should indeed be stressed in the believer’s life, but for Owen

⁷⁸ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:207-09, 282-91.

⁷⁹ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:217-19.

⁸⁰ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:234. There is also conviction, but this does not always result in changed life (cf. John 16:8-11).

⁸¹ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:218-19.

⁸² Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:221.

this change would not be merely in outward enthusiastic behavior, or merely through emotional outbursts from within, but in holiness of life, or Christ-like character.⁸³

The Holy Spirit by His power put forth in regeneration would subjectively change the thinking or mind of the believer from darkness to enlightenment, change the affections to love and desire the good found in God and His Word, and change the will to do the will of God from the heart.⁸⁴ Owen desired to keep the emotional and subjective element of the Spirit's work to avoid rationalism, but he wanted to also avoid biblically the fact that the Spirit's work can be rationally accounted for as the Word of God is received as the Spirit of truth.⁸⁵ In defense of the truth of the Bible, Owen affirmed that the Spirit's work in regeneration was rationally accounted for in that those who are acted upon by the Spirit of God believe the Scriptures, and so reveal to all that they have received the Spirit of truth. For John Owen this is the real difference between true regeneration and mere enthusiastic experiences: True regeneration produces holiness whereas the other just produces feelings and actions of wildness. Owen did not want to merely emphasize objective truth, but that the objective truth would change the minds, affections and wills of the subjective soul acted upon by the Holy Spirit.⁸⁶ So there was a biblical balance in John Owen's theology of regeneration between the objective truth received by the believer from God's Word, and the subjective soul renewed.⁸⁷

⁸³ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:224.

⁸⁴ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:280-81.

⁸⁵ One important scripture that emphasizes this work of the Spirit that is rational and objective, yet suprarational and subjective upon the believer is 1 Thessalonians 1:5: "...Because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake" (^{ESV} 1 Thessalonians 1:5).

⁸⁶ Owen wrote summarily of the extensive and exhaustive nature of sanctification: "In the sanctification of believers, the Holy Spirit does work in them, on their whole souls, their minds, wills, and affections, a gracious, supernatural habit, principle, and disposition of living unto God; the substance or essence, the life and being of holiness does consist." *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:468-69.

⁸⁷ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:280-81; also see Owen's biblical balance elsewhere between the objective word of God's revelation in Scripture, and the subjective experience of the believer acted upon by the Holy Spirit in *The Work of the Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:47-69.

C. Affections: the Experience of a Transformed Desires

J. I. Packer wrote that “true religion claims the affections as well as the intellect.”⁸⁸ In regeneration, the believer is completely changed from within the soul, and her affections now run on the trajectory of desiring Christ and His will, although she still must mortify and kill sin in her life each and every day. As the believer mortifies the indwelling sin within, Owen taught that the Spirit will enable the affections to increasingly desire what is good, lovely, and true (cf. Phil. 4:8).⁸⁹ Owen wrote that “True grace fixes the affections on spiritual things,” and produces a new bent “toward the spiritual” in regeneration.”⁹⁰ He wrote: “Saving grace fills up the affections with spiritual things, fills the soul with spiritual love, joy, delight...”⁹¹ The Holy Spirit grants to us new affections that love what God loves and hates what God hates. The Spirit in regeneration teaches us not only the truth, but desires for us to experience a taste of the truth.

The work of the Spirit on man’s affections is a cosmic, gargantuan work of grace whereby the desires of the whole soul of man is focused vehemently and intently upon the Father’s love as revealed in Jesus. This wonderful work of the Spirit causes us to experience real satisfaction, rest, and comfort of God in our difficult pilgrimage here. In fact, Owen summarizes this cosmic work of the Spirit’s changing men’s affections by saying that it is “the great contest between heaven and earth is about the affections of the poor worm which we call man”.⁹² Owen taught that if God changes what the believer loves and desires most, then she will seek spiritual things at God’s right hand in Christ Jesus (Col. 3:1-4). The believer will then know who they are and what is most important in their lives, although they will often be humbled by their little progress because of

⁸⁸ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 32.

⁸⁹ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:329-337.

⁹⁰ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:240.

⁹¹ John Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III: 240.

⁹² Owen, *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, in *Works*, VII:395.

remaining sin, nevertheless, the pursuit of Christ will be on, moving them forward, and toward Him, and they will determinedly make an effort at pleasing Him (cf. Phil. 3:8ff; 2 Cor. 5:9-15).⁹³

But only a real experience of God's saving grace and power upon the affections will do, for like the mind and will, only a heart change from within can truly change a person's desires, otherwise the efforts will only be outward and external, a focus on mere behavior with no real and lasting change.⁹⁴ Owen wrote concerning this:

Some have changed the affections temporality in part through "habitual change" such as through education, philosophy, reason, some spiritual light, etc. Through this, however, no man can become truly spiritually minded, that is, characterized by spiritual thoughts or sanctified in the mind and heart except they be born again by the Spirit of God.⁹⁵

Though this temporal alteration can turn the course or stream of men's affections for a short duration, it cannot change the nature of them. Some have mere temporary or occasional impressions made on the affections, but no real transforming change for life.

D. Gazing on Christ by Faith: the Experience of Christian Meditation and Peace

Not only does the Spirit change the heart in regeneration, giving new loves and desires to our affections, but there are ways that the believer can encourage their own hearts and increase their faith in reliance upon the Spirit's work. John Owen wrote encouraging believers to nourish their minds and hearts with contemplations and meditations upon God's truth, then to nourish their affections, similar to how folks nourish their bodies with food. This experiential nourishment can bring to the believing soul a deep joy, assurance of faith, and a confident, immovable heart when it is established by experience of God's love in Christ:

⁹³ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III: 237-40.

⁹⁴ Owen, *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, in *Works*, VII:411.

⁹⁵ Owen, *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, in *Works*, VII:413-14.

The heart is immovable, when it is established by experience, when we find a substance, a reality, a spiritual nourishment proposed unto us. Now, how can this be obtained unless we are conversant in our minds about them? Unless we dwell in our thoughts and affections upon them? For thereby do we taste and find how good the Lord is in this work of grace.⁹⁶

Much of Owen's work, particularly in his later life, is dedicated to exegeting and pastorally and practically expositing the truths revealed in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that teaches:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (^{ESV} 2 Corinthians 3:18).

Owen asserted often throughout his writings that believers can grow in their communion with God and in their sanctification through the experience of gazing on Christ by faith.⁹⁷ The Lord who is the Spirit would then photocopy the likeness of Christ onto the believer. By gazing on Christ by faith, believer's thoughts would be raised up to heavenly, spiritual realities, and they would experience more change in their hearts and lives as they practiced this. Owen wrote that believers may grow and flourish in Christ from communion with Him, and learning to live or feed upon Christ by faith (2 Cor. 3:18). Owen confidently asserted that here would be a progressive and gradual change that happens through the Lord's Word and Spirit that can transform the believer into the image of Christ.

In fact, this continual contemplation on the glory of Christ, particularly in His person, office, and grace would carry believers cheerfully, comfortably, and victoriously through life and death, and in all conflicts and struggles that are germane to the Christian life.⁹⁸ Owen said that this was one of the greatest privileges of believers now was that one

⁹⁶ John Owen, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, III: 316.

⁹⁷ See especially John Owen, *Mediations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, in *Works*, I:140; I:274-432; Also, *Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, in *Works*, VII:344-351.

⁹⁸ Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, in *Works*, I:277.

could gaze on the glory of Christ with eyes of faith given by the Spirit, and prepare themselves for seeing Him face to face. In doing so, heaven's greatest treasures, riches, and joy would be theirs on a pilgrimage fraught with many frustrations and frowns.⁹⁹ When believers gaze on Christ with eyes of faith and mediate upon Him, they are seeing the example of what all men made in God's image should look like, and this has a spiritual power to transform them into the same image. Christ Jesus was the Spirit-filled and empowered man who was the True Image of God in this world, and by beholding Him now with eyes of faith, the believer could be changed in His image. Owen confidently wrote, displaying great hope in the Spirit's power and work in the believer, saying:

Did we abide more constantly in the beholding or contemplation of the Person of Christ, of the glory and beauty of His holiness, as the pattern and great example proposed unto us, we should be more transformed into His image and likeness. ...[To behold by faith] His meekness, patience, self-denial, quietness in bearing reproaches, contempt of the world, zeal for the glory of God, compassion to the souls of men, condescension to the weaknesses of all....Christ in the gospel is proposed unto us as our pattern and example of holiness....***Wherefore let us be much in the contemplation of what He was, what He did, how in all instances of duties and trials He carried Himself, until an image or idea of His perfect holiness is implanted in our minds, and we are made like unto Him...*** (my emphasis).¹⁰⁰

This living in the constant contemplation of the glory of Christ will cause the believer to abound in obedience to God. The more the believer experiences this truth, the more he will engage himself in this faithful living. The more he does this, the more he will be humbled before Christ as to how hard it is to fight against remaining sin within, yet how glorious Christ appears to him, and he will want him more and more as Savior and friend. Owen wrote:

⁹⁹ Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, in *Works*, I:279-84; I:459-61.

¹⁰⁰ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:513.

Let us live in the constant contemplation of the glory of Christ, and virtue will proceed from him to repair all our decays, to renew a right spirit within us, and to cause us to abound in duties of obedience¹⁰¹

Owen wasn't satisfied just to write about the importance of gazing on Christ, and mediating upon Him, but also sought to emphasize the importance of this of this experiential element against having a mere notional or mental or intellectual knowledge of God in Christ:

The affecting power of it upon our hearts is that which we should aim at. Wherein does the blessedness of the saints above [in heaven] consist? Is it not herein, that they behold and see the glory of God in Christ? And what is the effect of it upon those blessed souls? Does it not change them into the same image, or make them like unto Christ? Does it not fill and satiate them with joy, rest, delight, complacency, and ineffable satisfaction? ***Do we expect, do we desire, the same state of blessedness? It is our present view of the glory of Christ which is our initiation thereinto, if we are exercised in it, until we have an experience of its transforming power in our souls***" (my emphasis).¹⁰²

E. Prayer: the Experience of Fresh Supplies of the Spirit

Prayer was another important way that the believer could respond to the Spirit's powerful work, and experience more of God. For Owen, it was axiomatic that theology finds its true expression in prayer, and prayer is the clearest reflection of theology.¹⁰³ Owen wrote that prayer is the vital breath our spiritual life unto God.¹⁰⁴ Owen wrote that the Holy Spirit grows us progressively to be like Christ through prayer. Prayer is a primary way in which God's will becomes ours in our lives. Owen taught that the Spirit teaches us and enables us to pray in three ways as sons of our Heavenly Father in Christ. The Spirit gives believers spiritual insights into the promises of God and the grace of the covenant, whereby they know what to ask in prayer, and what to expect because of

¹⁰¹ Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, in *Works*, I:460.

¹⁰² Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, in *Works*, I:307.

¹⁰³ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 224.

¹⁰⁴ Owen, *The Work of the Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:252.

God's mercy and grace in Christ.¹⁰⁵ The Spirit acquaints believers with, and gives experiences of wants and needs, granting a deep sense of desire for relief from God.¹⁰⁶ The Spirit of God in prayer creates and stirs up desires in the believer's soul for its own preservation, increase, and improvement. The believer prays to be sanctified, according to all of the promises of the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁷

Prayer is for the renewal of the Spirit's power and graces for each day. Prayer is for illumination and deeper understanding of God's objective truth.¹⁰⁸ The Word of God is objectively God's Word whether men believed it or not, but by the Spirit of God, this authority and power of God's Word will shine through clearly for believers to receive as truth. As recipients of the truth, the truth will have power to change them and guide them, and believers would be granted power to do what they are learning. Praying for the Spirit is to be a daily pursuit in order to make progress in holiness and happiness in Jesus Christ, to receive "supplies of grace and mercy" from the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁹ Owen emphasized the importance of the power of prayer as an experience in the life of the believer, concluding his sermon entitled *The Christian's Work of Dying Daily*:

Many will tell you, that when God hath been pleased to keep up their minds unto the thoughts of things above, and draw out their affections to cleave unto them, all things have gone well with them, -- every prayer had life in it, and every sermon and duty, pleasure and joy; and their hearts have lain down and arisen in peace. But when they have lost their view of spiritual things, all other things continue, but there is a kind of deadness upon them....**Pray, then, that God would keep up your souls, by fresh supplies of his Spirit, unto a constant view of heavenly things. And you must do it by**

¹⁰⁵ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:272.

¹⁰⁶ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:273-74.

¹⁰⁷ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:276.

¹⁰⁸ Owen, *Works, The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:283.

¹⁰⁹ Owen, *Works, The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:277.

prayer, that God would give you fresh oil, to increase light in your minds and understandings (my emphasis).¹¹⁰

F. Comfort/Consolation: the Experience of God's Sweetness in Christ¹¹¹

Owen speaks throughout his works, and particularly in volume two *Of Communion with God*, of the importance of the believer communing with the Father specifically through His love, the Son through His grace, and the Spirit particularly as He is the Comforter, or Consoler, or Encourager of His people. Owen emphasized that the Spirit comforts and consoles all believers so that they can know the sweetness of walking with God and being loved by Him. Owen thought the comforting or consoling work of the Holy Spirit was extremely important in the life of the believer. He addressed this subject both in his works on *Communion with God*¹¹² as well as in part two of his *Discourses Concerning the Holy Spirit and His Work*.¹¹³ Through an understanding of this sweet teaching of the Spirit's ministry, much confidence and courage can be made manifest in believer's lives as they live and witness for our Heavenly Father. Much fear is cast out of our hearts by this perfect love.¹¹⁴

Owen made an important distinction in believers' experiences of the Spirit of God when he distinguished between the Spirit as *Sanctifier* and the Spirit and *Consoler*, or *Comforter*. This distinction was to understand that while the Spirit's main goal was to make us like Christ, He was also to encourage and strengthen us in times of trouble and

¹¹⁰ Owen, *Works, Posthumous Sermons*, in *Works*, IX:351-52.

¹¹¹ Searching the word "consolation" on my e-reader for all of Owen's works returns at least 186 different places in his works, emphasizing how important it was to comfort believers in Christ as a pastor.

¹¹² Owen, *On Communion with God*, in *Works*, II:249ff.

¹¹³ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:351ff.

¹¹⁴ Owen truly desired for all believers to constantly be thinking about the Father's love toward them in Christ as an incentive to stronger faith, and encouragement. Owen wanted believers to fill their hearts with thoughts of God that were loving and gracious as He has been revealed in Jesus Christ. He wrote sweetly: "According to our apprehensions are of [God the Father], and His heart towards us, so will the settlement of our souls in clearing to Him by believing be....If we know the name of God, as by Himself revealed—know the love and kindness wrapped up therein—we cannot but trust Him. Let us be always thinking of God, with a clear persuasion that so it is; that He is gracious, loving, ready to receive us, delighting, rejoicing to embrace us, to do us good, to give us mercy and glory—whatever He has promised in Christ; and it will exceedingly tend to the establishment of our hearts." Owen, *Posthumous Sermons*, in *Works*, IX:37, 42.

difficulty. Jesus himself promised the Spirit in the context of the suffering and tribulation of the disciples when he was bodily leaving them in John 14-16. Owen said that the Spirit comes as sanctifier with power to conquer an unbelieving heart, and comes as comforter with sweetness to be received in a believing heart.¹¹⁵ Owen emphasized that the Spirit would bring God's word to the believer's mind. He would help us to drink deeply on God's Holy Word, and the word would sweetly become the "breasts of all of our consolation" as the Holy Spirit gave the believer an understanding of God's love in Christ communicated through His promises. This is a summary of Owen's teaching in this beautiful section of his works:

...This is [the Spirit's] work to the end of the world, -- to bring the promises of Christ to our minds and hearts, to give us the comfort of them, the joy and sweetness of them, much beyond that which the disciples found in them, when Christ in person spake them to them¹¹⁶Every promise brings sweetness [to the pressured, struggling believer]¹¹⁷....The life and soul of all our comforts lie treasured up in the promises of Christ. They are the breasts of all our consolation...No sooner doth the soul begin to feel the life of a promise warming his heart, relieving, cherishing, supporting, delivering from fear, entanglements, or troubles, but it may, it ought, to know that the Holy Ghost is there; which will add to his joy, and lead him into fellowship with him.¹¹⁸

Owen stressed at length the Spirit's Comforting ministry because he knew how often believers were troubled by their own sin, and from the struggles and persecutions that Christians are exposed to in this world. He wrote that the "general properties of the office of the Spirit as Comforter" is a gracious act of "infinite condescension" to the sinner where there is need, with "unspeakable love" communicated from the Father through the Son to the needy heart, combined with "infinite power" to strengthen, and to encourage the believer's heart, with the "unchangeable continuance" of the Spirit's

¹¹⁵ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:226ff.

¹¹⁶ Owen, *On Communion with God*, in *Works*, II:237.

¹¹⁷ Owen, *On Communion with God*, in *Works*, II:238.

¹¹⁸ Owen, *On Communion with God*, in *Works*, II:239.

ministry to continue with every believer, granting them the presence of Jesus Christ in His bodily absence as He rules at God's right hand as Sovereign King and kind Lord and friend.¹¹⁹

...Both the efficacy of our consolation and the life of our obedience do depend hereon; for when we know that every acting of the Spirit of God towards us, every gracious impression from him on our understandings, wills, or affections, are all of them in pursuit of that infinite peculiar love whence it was that he took upon him the office of a comforter, they cannot but all of them influence our hearts with spiritual refreshment. And when faith is defective in this matter, so that it doth not exercise itself in the consideration of this love of the Holy Ghost, we shall never arrive unto solid, abiding, strong consolation".¹²⁰

III. True Christian Experience and Hypocrisy: The Difference between the Power of God in Transforming Spiritual Change and Mere Externals

A. Authentic and Counterfeit Experiences

As we have seen, John Owen, along with other Puritans of his day, emphasized the importance of true Christian experience that should come forth by the Holy Spirit in God's people. Owen also emphasized the importance of the Word of God in the believer's life, and taught that the word should define and set the bounds of truth Christian experience. Owen emphasized that the Word of God was given to inform, but to do more than inform. The Word was not merely informative, but *transformative* by the Spirit's power in the life of the believer.¹²¹ Owen wanted the believer not to merely know the

¹¹⁹ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:368-79.

¹²⁰ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:374. All of our comfort throughout our lives and especially at the time of our death, would be from the comfort of the Spirit. To put positively in summary, what Owen wrote negatively as in "without them" speaking of the Holy Spirit's comforts, the believer can go through afflictions with humility, yet with confidence and courage; the believer can mortify sin, and despise it more deeply from the heart because of its repugnance before a holy God; duties can be done with a sweetness of pleasing our Beloved, and with humility that they are not as wholehearted, nor as holy as we desire; prosperity can be enjoyed as a gift of God in the Christian life and we can give greater thanks for all that we have; we can enjoy all good gifts from God and have all of our loves ordered under the majesty and lordship of Jesus Christ; we can be joyous in affliction, enduring by God's grace to the end, experiencing the comfort of the Spirit in our daily walk, and the light of God's Word and hopeful future at our deaths. Summarized from Owen, *Works, On Communion with God*, in *Works*, II:261-64; 273ff.

¹²¹ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:12-13.

truth, but to feel what the truth deserves. These were the pastoral reasons that Owen wrote about true Christian experience.

But it is important to ask what Owen thought specifically about how the Holy Spirit uses the word of God as means to grant a true experience of His grace and power. How did Owen argue against radical enthusiasts or ranters who emphasized experience apart from God's word? While there ought to be transformative change and true Christian experience, there are also those who abuse experience and who have sought to disconnect Christian experiences from God's Word. In other words, how does one recognize a truly Christian experience contrasted with hypocrisy? Authentic, true Christian experience versus counterfeit experiences can be weighed by focusing on Owen's two important teachings: 1) The Spirit as anointing, or as the one who teaches Christ's Word to the Church, and 2) The Spirit as author of Holy Scripture. These two truths help to focus us on true Christian experience, and avoid the pitfalls of both rationalism and emotionalism. Owen taught that the Word of God is the only foundation and objective source of truth and true Christian experience, but the Holy Spirit anoints the believer to subjectively understand and live the truth. The Spirit inspired men to write the objective word to reveal God to the world and especially to His dear people. The Spirit also anoints men to understand and believe this Word. There is an objective element to His Word in the inscripturing of the Holy Word of God, and there is the subjective element of believing and understanding and rightly knowing His Word.

B. The Holy Spirit: An Uncion or Anointing of Jesus Christ

Christ Jesus was anointed by the Spirit throughout His ministry. The exalted Christ sends forth the Spirit upon His church to anoint believers and to lead them into all the truth. He did this primarily through the Apostles and writing the Scriptures, which are the foundation of the Church's life and doctrines. But the Spirit through the Word

continues to lead men into the truth, and to a knowledge of God and true Christian experience through that same word through His anointing and illuminating grace upon the minds and hearts and of believers. It is important to note Owen's Christological emphasis again, when he asserts that believers have their unction immediately from Christ.¹²² Wherefore, the Father is the original, supreme cause of our anointing; but the Lord Christ, the Holy One, is the immediate efficient cause thereof.¹²³

The believer's unction is summarized by Owen as the communication of the Holy Spirit from the exalted Christ for the saving illumination of their minds, teaching them the truth of Scripture, and to "adhere firmly unto it in love and obedience"¹²⁴. Owen taught that the believing soul would firmly cleave to the truths, and rejoice and delight in it, as it transformed the whole inward man into the image and likeness revealed in it.¹²⁵ Owen wrote further:

Herein doth God give unto us "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, the eyes of our understanding being enlightened, that we may know what is the hope of his calling," Eph. i. 17, 18. He maketh use, indeed, of the outward means of instruction by the word, and teacheth nothing but what is revealed therein; but he gives us "an understanding that we may know him that is true," and openeth our eyes that we may clearly and spiritually see the wondrous things that are in his law. And there are no teachings like unto his; none so abiding, none so effectual. When spiritual things, through this anointing, are discovered in a spiritual manner, then do they take up an immovable possession in the minds of men.¹²⁶

¹²² To reassert from the opening line of this paper: "Christology must shape the experiences as well as the minds of believers. What believers should know and understand about Christ is revealed clearly by God in Holy Scripture, and this should be useful in bringing change to hearts and minds by the power of the Holy Spirit. There should be a concern in the Christian life for both doctrine and life. Experience is good if it is shaped and formed by Christology, and enjoyed within the boundaries of what Holy Scripture teaches."

¹²³ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:392-93. Owen wrote: "Believers receive their anointing from Jesus Christ, the enthroned Holy One. By this anointing, Christ gives spiritual instruction and saving illumination in the mind of God and in the mysteries of the Gospel."

¹²⁴ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV: 394.

¹²⁵ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV: 394.

¹²⁶ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:395-96.

The importance of this cannot be emphasized enough in Owen's writings. This anointing by the Spirit was subjective illumination and therefore a true experience of the truth, but at the same time, and very importantly it was a spiritual understanding of the objective truth of God's Word. Owen taught that the anointing received from Christ empowers the believer to understand the love of God in Christ that surpasses knowledge, and to know the hope of their calling, especially with regards to the power of God by His Spirit (cf. Eph. 1:15ff; 3:17-19).¹²⁷ The Spirit gives to believers light to see Christ as glorious and to receive God's truth as beautiful, to empower His people to have strength in their walk with God, support and comfort in times of affliction, and especially a daily renewal of sanctifying grace for every circumstance in the believer's life. The Holy Spirit shows believers the beauty of the truth and they experience the power of it, Owen wrote. This means that believers can not only know the truth, but to love it deeply.¹²⁸

Note that for Owen, this "anointed" knowledge is much more than mere notional, intellectual knowledge or mere information. Rather, it is experienced; it is life-changing; it should transform the believer's knowledge into a taste of the divine truth. In other words, the knowledge will lead to a love for that truth, and for a love to God. Experience will be limited to the love of what God's Word teaches, to hinder excessive and unbiblical displays of folly and emotionalism. Yet the mind will be raised up to receive the truths, and to be changed by them, and there will be a love for God that gradually grows, and a desire to be obedient to the truth revealed. The truth will be experientially tasted as with food, and both satisfy and secure the soul until the end. Owen wrote:

...When this Holy Spirit doth, in and by his teaching, breathe into our hearts a holy, divine love unto and complacency in the things we are taught; when he enables us to taste how gracious the Lord is in them, rendering them

¹²⁷ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:396-96.

¹²⁸ Owen, *Posthumous Sermons*, in *Works*, XI:343-50.

sweeter unto us than the honey or the honeycomb; when he makes them our delight and joy, exciting and quickening the practical principles of our minds unto a compliance with them in holy obedience, -- then have we that unction from the Holy One which will both sanctify and secure our souls unto the end.¹²⁹

C. The Word of God and Experience

True Christian experience must always be rooted in God's Word or Revelation. Understanding the truths of God's Word leads to true Christian experience by the unction or anointing of the Holy Spirit, and then the believer should experience an increased faith, joy, and love in God. It may not surprise us that John Owen, one of the greatest of the Puritans, had the uncompromising commitment to the Word of God. Owen believed that when Scripture speaks, God speaks, that the entire Bible is the product of God's *theopneustic* out-breathing (2 Tim. 3:16-17).¹³⁰ Owen, like other Puritans, desired for the Word to root all of our experiences.¹³¹ One of the important characteristics of the Puritans in general, and John Owen in particular was "An uncompromising commitment to the authority of the Bible as guiding all of life".¹³² Gordon Wakefield wrote "The Puritans regarded Scripture as the supreme and final authority".¹³³ Stephen Westcott, editor of Owen's 'Biblical Theology' said interestingly, and perhaps in a bit of overstatement, "If Calvin was preeminently the theologian of the Holy Spirit, then John Owen was supremely the theologian of the infallible Bible".¹³⁴

As we have learned, some thought unfairly that John Owen was not only an unhealthy mystic who had gone too far in his focus on Christian experiences. Additionally, some

¹²⁹ Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:397.

¹³⁰ J. R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas, *The Holy Spirit and Reformed Spirituality*, 128-29.

¹³¹ Dorothy Williams, in "Puritan Quest for the Enjoyment of God" (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 1997), asserted that "... Puritan piety was... Mystical in its exploration of immediate and ineffable enjoyment of God... Yet dependent upon Holy Scripture."

¹³² Kopic, *Communion with God*, 28-29.

¹³³ Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion*, 12.

¹³⁴ Owen, *A Defense of Sacred Scripture Against Modern Fanaticism*, in *Biblical Theology*, 772. Although as Vose pointed out Owen wrote concerning the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures because they were "assaulted" by both Roman Catholics, the enthusiasts, or radicals with inner light, see Vose, "Profile of a Puritan", 78.

thought that Owen's stress on experience in the Christian life would promote antinomian tendencies in the church. In fact, theologian William Sherlock in Owen's time, criticized Owen's masterpiece *Communion with God*, accusing him of Antinomianism.¹³⁵ The tremendous difference between John Owen and the medieval mystics (and especially the antinomians!) was the one of the unique characteristics of the Puritans, that is, the understanding of the Bible as the source from which all knowledge of God and experiences of God should come. In fact, although the rationalists and ranters of John Owen's time were different, they were similar in that both denied the Word of God as an objective source for man's soul to be renewed and sanctified through the experienced power of the Holy Spirit. Both rationalists who detached the Word from the Spirit's work, and the "Ranters" or mystics who detached their experiences from the Word of God were wrong. Against these errors, Owen emphasized the objective revealed word of God and the subjective work of the Spirit in illumination and enlightenment of men's minds.¹³⁶

Owen once said memorably: "He that would utterly separate the Spirit from the word had as good burn his Bible".¹³⁷ Owen wrote "Divine revelation is the proper object of divine faith".¹³⁸ Divine revelation revealed in Scripture for Owen was the very mouth of God, the ultimate authority for the believer, and the final test of all believer's

¹³⁵ Owen, *On Communion with God*, in *Works*, II:275ff; Kavic, *Communion with God*, 153-155. Vose wrote, "[Owen's] great problem in taking such a position [encouraging communion with God] was the constant danger of being misinterpreted as an enthusiast. Owen sought to be clear about the matter by stressing that the Holy Scripture and Holy Spirit must always be linked as God performs his work for Christ sake upon the soul of man. ***Christian experience is always an experience of the Holy Spirit***" (my emphasis). Quoted in Vose, "Profile of a Puritan", 179-81.

¹³⁶ As the editor to Owen's *Works* commented in his prefatory note: "However wide and vital may be the discrepancy in other respects between the mystic and the sceptic [or rationalist], in this principle they seem as one; and they are as one also to some extent in the practical tendencies it engenders, such as the disparagement of the Scriptures as an objective rule of faith and life." Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:4.

¹³⁷ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:192.

¹³⁸ Owen, *The Work of the Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:47.

experiences.¹³⁹ When Owen wrote of the Holy Spirit, although he would have many applications, and include personal experiences to prove his points, nevertheless, he confessed that “I have endeavored so to declare and assert what the Scripture manifestly teaches concerning them, confirming it with testimonies of the ancient writers of the church...”¹⁴⁰ Owen wrote that the chief end of God’s revelation to man in His Word (concerning us) was so that it may put forth a spiritual and practical power in our souls, and that we may do the things which are revealed to us”.¹⁴¹ Owen, then, while emphasizing experience in the Christian life, nevertheless, insisted that all experiences be rooted and founded in Holy Scripture.¹⁴² Sinclair Ferguson writes: "Owen steers a course which avoids mysticism on the one hand, and on the other, the pietism and quiescence of a later period in the Evangelical tradition, which was marred by unhealthy subjectivism".¹⁴³ Experience was important for Owen as we have seen, but it must be a work of the Holy Spirit, and a work of the Holy Spirit grounded in Holy Scripture.

Conclusion: How Owen’s Teaching on True Experience by the Spirit can Strengthen the Church Today

I think that an understanding of John Owen’s anthroposensitive, experiential theology, that focuses on the Spirit of God and the Word, the objective revelation of God

¹³⁹ Owen wrote, "All exegesis is concerned with teaching the truth, that is, with exposition of the divine mind as contained in the Scriptures...aided by the Holy Spirit for the great purposes of teaching the flock, refuting errors, correction, and discipline...[God desires we come to an understanding] of the mind of the Holy Spirit," in *A Defense of Sacred Scripture Against Modern Fanaticism*, in *Biblical Theology*, 807-08.

¹⁴⁰ Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, III:9.

¹⁴¹ Owen, *Grace and Duty of Spiritual Mindedness*, in *Works*, VII:114.

¹⁴² Owen demonstrated this concern of excess when he wrote greatly concerned about forms of "mental prayer because he was afraid that it would result in the "abandonment of reason, and the release of unrestrained fancy". Owen stressed the inexpressible joy a believer should have in prayer, but was also very careful to focus the experience on God's Word, and the freedom of the Sovereign Spirit of God to bring that joy to the believer as He wills it. Owen's focus was on the kindness of the Spirit in His gifts to believers, not on a technique of man to somehow be mastered. Owen, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, IV:328f; Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion*, 88-89.

¹⁴³ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 224. Also David M. King notes well that Owen's was not an "unhealthy" subjectivism, it was nevertheless, focused subjectively on the soul very similar to the mystics. In "The Affective Spirituality of John Owen", 225-26.

in His Word, and the subjective experience of the believer by the Spirit's help, may do the following things to edify and strengthen God's church today.

First, as Owen asserted, true Christian experience will make Christians holy which is what we desperately need before a gracious and holy God, but also before an ever-watching world in a culture that has become desperately depraved. Christians need to have something useful to say in how they live as well as in what they say. As John Owen wrote in his own day, the church needs Christians who are useful, Christ-like, and a blessing to God and to others. He wrote a wonderful summary of what it means to be Christian, living a transformed life by the Spirit before the watching world:

He who has learned to be meek, humble, lowly, patient, self-denying, holy, zealous, peaceable, to purify his heart, and to be useful in this life, ***is indeed the person who is best acquainted with evangelical truth*** (my emphasis).¹⁴⁴

In other words, the best life will be the holy and happy life of living the truth that shows forth in a transformed and humble character by God's grace.

As Owen taught, the church should learn that experience in the Christian life is not optional, but necessary for growth in grace. Against antinomian tendencies in the church then and now, Owen can teach us of the importance of progress in the Christian life. Our knowledge for the truth can become a love for the same truth. Against legalism, or tendencies of replacing God's Word with the teachings of man ("making void the word of God because of tradition" as our Lord Jesus teaches, see Matt. 15:1ff), Owen can teach believers today to love to obey God out of the power and grace given by the Holy Spirit, as they come to both understand and love God's Word. Owen can give Christians a better

¹⁴⁴ Owen, *Nature and Causes of Apostasy from the Gospel*, in *Works*, VII:114.

understanding of a Grace-focused and Spirit-empowered life of service to Christ and His people.

Christians today, especially congregations and denominations more prone to emphasize experience, can learn from Owen that true Christian experience must always be rooted in God's Word. Owen can give the church an experiential foundation in God's holy, inscripturated Word that does not deny the subjective experience by the Spirit, but may prevent temptations to modern individualistic and subjective mindsets that seek to define experiences merely based on emotions. Owen can teach us that Christians have an anointing from Jesus Christ, and this anointing not only teaches God's Word to the mind, but teaches believers to test every experience by the Word of God, so providing safe boundaries for those experiences (cf. I John 2:20, 27; 4:1ff; 1 Tim. 4:1ff). Owen can teach us to understand the objective revelation of God's inscripturated word, while earnestly and persistently seeking and praying to the Spirit for subjective anointing and illumination to better understand this objective source from God's mind. This important teaching seems like it could helpfully counter both errors of rationalism, or the Word without the Spirit, or emotionalism that reduces Christianity to an experience without the Word.

Experience as Owen taught might give believers a better understanding between the imbalances between the heart and mind that has been discussed throughout church history. Even today, according to folks' personalities, you find those who are inclined more towards the mind, or the heart. Rarely, do you see Christians seeking to balance these two important aspects of faith and life. Owen always biblically balanced the importance of the mind and the heart. The mind must receive all revelation from God, and understand it; but the heart must also be changed, through the affections, so that the

believer will not only know the truth, but love the truth. Owen could teach the church that true Christian experience should be sought through earnest prayer (cf. Eph. 1:15ff; 3:14ff), but that the experience is never guaranteed because of the Sovereign freedom of the Spirit of God to grant this. Owen can teach us to pray faithfully and expectantly for God's "wonder-working" power through the Spirit of God, and especially as the believer commits herself to using the means of grace. With this, the experience of God's truth can be sought by the Holy Spirit so that there is a real taste of delight to know God and to be empowered to more increasingly love and obey Him. Nevertheless, these experiences will be sought with an understanding that the Spirit *is* God, and therefore is free and sovereign to bring these experiences as He is pleased to do. *We will first seek God not for an experience, but because He is God, and He is good, and He commands us to seek after Him. We will seek Him to be able to obey Him.*

Owen taught that the believers experience is always because of union with Jesus, the Anointed King at God's right hand. Owen can help the church today to have a more Christ-focused sanctification, avoiding legalism and license in the Christian life. Our experience will be grace-induced, and Christ-empowered, and the desire for the experience will be because we are in union with Christ, and is therefore a precious gift that will neither be abused nor neglected. The Christian's experience as Owen taught can promote and encourage believers to grow in faith, hope, and love. If believers can truly know the sweetness of the Father's love and mercy toward them in Christ, their faith will grow in trust of Him, and they will know that He intends only good to His children. Owen can help a believer's faith to grow and to reach the blessed assurance of faith.

Experience helps to effectively combat Satan, knowing that believers wage a similar warfare as Christ Jesus against our enemy. Owen can help believers to be more than

conquerors over the enemy, the devil. The believer will not be intimidated by the evil one, but will stand as conquerors in her King, by His power and anointing; she will not be surprised with how malicious and subtle temptations from him are because she knows that Christ experienced these same temptations on her behalf, and Christ will give her support and encouragement by the Spirit of Comfort, so she can resist them as well.

Experience is to prevent hypocrisy and to avoid apostasy. Owen can help believers to stay on the path of life in their union with Christ, growing in salvation. Experience can prevent professing believers from declension in their souls and ultimately apostasy. Believers may grow in their assurance, and mortify their sins, and seek to stay focused on Christ, being more conscious and aware of their hearts growing hard, and for them to experience declension of our souls in apathy and indifference and disobedience if they neglect the experiences of the Spirit of God that He is pleased to provide for us in Christ.

Ultimately, the Christian's "chief end" through experience is to know God and glorify God, and to please Him. Owen can help the church to better and more eagerly please God and glorify Him! Perhaps believers will seek to know God as God, and their God more personally, and they will seek to more increasingly please Him. It is appropriate that one like Owen who set the example of what it looks like for a believer to glorify God and to enjoy Him, and who taught so much on the importance of the Holy Spirit bringing true Christian experience to every soul, should have a tombstone that reads in this way in memory of this great man and example of Jesus Christ:

And, having set aside other pursuits, ***he cultivated and experienced the blessed communion with God of which he wrote.*** In this world, he was a

pilgrim who drew very near to grasping the full glory of heaven (my emphasis).¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in Kopic, *Communion with God*, 240.

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