

## For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free

### John Owen's *A Discourse Concerning Liturgies, and Their Imposition*

By Daniel R. Hyde

John Owen (1616–83) has been called the “prince of Puritans”<sup>1</sup> and “the Calvin of England.”<sup>2</sup> This is fitting for one whose epitaph depicts him as “worthy to be enrolled among the first Divines of the age” (Toon, *God's Statesman*, 182). In studies of this preeminent and voluminous Reformed theologian there has been substantial ink spilled concerning his covenant theology, doctrines of the Trinity, Christ, the Christian life, and the Lord's Supper, as well as his theological method, to name a few areas; yet, there is scant material devoted to Owen's doctrine of worship.<sup>3</sup> In surveying the literature on Owen one comes across only two articles that deal directly with his liturgical theology. The first is a popular article that draws general applications for today while the other is an academic article that briefly surveys Owen's doctrine of worship in his massive commentary on Hebrews.<sup>4</sup> One of his most important writings on worship that has drawn even scant attention in the literature was his 1662 polemical treatise, *A Discourse Concerning Liturgies, and Their Imposition*.<sup>5</sup>

Written just before the Act of Uniformity and the subsequent “Great Ejection,” Owen's *Discourse* gives us a glimpse into his liturgical principles and practices. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that the key to understanding what Owen says about liturgies in his *Discourse* is the doctrine of Christian freedom, or Christian liberty from the yoke of the Mosaic Law and the yoke of Pharisaic law. The importance of this thesis is seen in reading Douglas Jones' essay, which rightly explains that Owen's issue was a State-imposed liturgy; yet, Jones does not go on to explain the underlying ground of Owen's argument: the freedom Christ has won for his people from the burdens of regulations and rules (Jones, 112).

This is the theological principle behind all that Owen says in his *Discourse*. No doubt it was also a strategic political treatise in a time of great upheaval in the Church

of England. In fact, while Christian liberty was Owen's theological principle, one cannot fail to be impressed by Owen's appropriation of this argument from Thomas

---

THE AUTHOR: Rev. Daniel R. Hyde (M.Div., Westminster Seminary California) is the pastor of the Oceanside United Reformed Church (URCNA) in Carlsbad, California. He has written *Jesus Loves the Little Children: Why We Baptize Children* (Reformed Fellowship, 2006), *The Good Confession: An Exploration of the Christian Faith* (Wipf & Stock, 2006), *What to Expect in Reformed Worship: A Visitor's Guide* (Wipf & Stock, 2007), *God With Us: Knowing the Mystery of Who Jesus Is* (Reformation Heritage, 2008), and *With Heart and Mouth: An Exposition of the Belgic Confession* (Reformed Fellowship, 2008).

1. Andrew Thomson, *John Owen: Prince of Puritans* (1850; Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, reprinted 2004).

2. Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1971) 173.

3. On Owen's covenant theology, see Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, Great Theologians, eds. John Webster, Trevor Hart, and Douglas B. Farrow (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007) 67–99. On Owen's doctrine of the Trinity, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle, England: Paternoster Press, 1998). On Owen's Christology, see Richard Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004). On Owen's doctrine of the Christian life, see Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987). On Owen's doctrine of the Lord's Supper, see Jon D. Payne, *John Owen on the Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004). On Owen's theological method, see Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen*, Texts & Studies in Reformation & Post-Reformation Thought, gen. ed. Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002).

4. Douglas Jones, “Liturgy Lessons from Owen,” *Reformation & Revival* 5:3 (Summer 1996): 111–118 and A. Craig Troxel, “Cleansed Once for All: John Owen on the Glory of Gospel Worship in ‘Hebrews,’” *Calvin Theological Journal* 32:2 (November 1997): 468–479.

5. E.g., Leslie A. Rawlinson devotes four pages in “Worship in Liturgy and Form,” in *Anglican and Puritan Thinking* (Huntingdon, London: The Westminster Conference, 1977) 81–84. Robert W. Oliver gives it a paragraph in *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, ed. Robert W. Oliver (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2002) 30. Peter Toon only mentions it in passing in *God's Statesman*, 124. Even

Cranmer's essay, "Of Ceremonies," at the end of the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*:

Some are put away, because the great excesse and multytude of them hathe so encreased in these latter dayes, that the burden of them was intollerable: wherof saincte Augustine in his tyme complayned, that they were growen to suche a noubre: that the state of christian people was in wurse case (concernyng that matter) then were the Jewes. And he counsayled that suche yocke and burden should be taken awaye: as tyme woulde serve quietly to doe it. But what woulde saincte Augustine have sayed if he hadde seen the Ceremonies of late dayes used among us? Wherunto the multitude used in his time was not to bee compared. This our excessive multitude of Ceremonies, was so great, and many of them so darke: that they dyd more confounde and darken, then declare and sette forth Christes benefites unto us. And besides this, *Christes Gospell is not a Ceremoniall lawe (as muche of Moses lawe was), but it is a relygion to serve God, not in bondage of the figure or shadowe: but in the freedome of spirite*, beeyng contente onely wyth those ceremonyes whyche dooe serve to a decente ordre and godlye discipline, and suche as bee apte to stirre uppe the dulle mynde of manne to the remembraunce of his duetie to God, by some notable and speciall significacion, whereby he myght bee edified (Emphasis added).<sup>6</sup>

Although John Owen was much more consistent in

---

Carl Trueman relegates his discussion of this treatise to a footnote: *John Owen*, 19 n48. Cf. William Young, "The Second Commandment: The Principle that God is to be Worshipped Only in Ways Prescribed in Holy Scripture and that the Holy Scripture the Whole Content of Worship, Taught by Scripture Itself," in *Worship in the Presence of God: A Collection of Essays on the Nature, Elements, and Historic Views and Practices of Worship*, ed. Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman (Fellsmere, Fla: Reformation Media and Press, 2006) 78–79.

6. *The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI*, Everyman's Library 448 (reprinted 1957; London, England: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1910) 287.

7. John Owen, "A Discourse of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer," in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 16 vols. (1850–53; repr. Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965) 4:246.

8. Cf. Owen's sermon to Parliament in 1646 entitled, "A Vision of Unchangeable, Free Mercy, in Sending the Means of Grace to Underserving Sinners," in *Works*, 8:28.

9. On the 1655 conferences dealing with the petition of Menasseh ben Israel of Amsterdam to allow Jews to settle in London, see Toon, *God's Statesman*, 96–97. As Toon points out, because of a lack of guidance and commitment on the part of English divines and businessmen, Cromwell unilaterally allowed Jews into London between 1656 and 1658.

applying this argument, he was speaking the received language of the State's church for the purpose of gaining political freedom for the Non-Conformist ministers, Christians, and churches in the post-Commonwealth era. He would return to this theme of the Christian's freedom twenty years after his *Discourse* was published in another treatise, his *Discourse of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer* (1682). In it Owen explained that one of his four reasons against the imposition of set prayers was that they tempted ecclesiastical authorities to use civil punishments against spiritual errors: "This brought fire and faggot into Christian religion, making havoc of the true church of Christ, and shedding the blood of thousands."<sup>7</sup> Such a situation could only serve to take away the Christians' freedom won for him by Christ.

#### BACKGROUND OF OWEN'S DISCOURSE

In analyzing Owen's *Discourse* its context is necessary for interpretation. Conscientious Reformed pastors had been put on notice ever since the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559 that adherence to one prescribed liturgy was necessary to minister in England's Church. This was only further exacerbated with the Act of Uniformity in 1662 and its fallout in the years that followed. The two dates of 1559 and 1662 stand as boundaries in the religious turmoil that upset England for over a century from the sixteenth century into the seventeenth century.

John Owen lived, was educated, and ministered in these tumultuous times. The issue of liturgy, then, was not one which he only wrote about from a distance, but one with which he had intimate knowledge. For example, from his days at Oxford University, Queen's College, as he began studies for his B.D. in 1635 until the time he left in 1637, he witnessed and participated in Archbishop Laud's ceremonialism (Toon, *God's Statesman*, 7).<sup>8</sup>

#### THE RESTORATION OF THE MONARCHY

England's Republic (1649–60) effectively came to an end with the death of Oliver Cromwell on September 3, 1658. As Lord Protector from 1653–58, Cromwell stayed in power because he was the army's greatest commander. Nevertheless he was a complex man, holding a deep-seated conviction in freedom, peace, and even religious toleration, including his failed effort to bring Jews back into England for the first time in hundreds of years.<sup>9</sup>

Upon his death, his son Richard succeeded as Lord Protector, though Richard was a weak military leader.

This led him to abdicate control of the army to Parliament and eventually to his retirement upon the advice of two generals. Upon his retirement a remnant of the last Parliament called by a King, known as the Long Parliament, asserted authority. What ensued was a society-wide fear of anarchy since there was no King, no Protector, and not even a strong Parliament. Even the Army was in dissolution.

The one strong commander was General Monk, who was in Scotland. He promised loyalty to Parliament. After marching upon London the Long Parliament dissolved itself and new elections were held under the air of stability. This meant bringing back the King. A new Parliament was elected with Royalists loyal to Charles Stuart II, who was in exile, as well as moderate Puritans. Charles sent a message to Parliament, written by Edward Hyde, calling for restoration of the King of all lords. This also called for liberty for “tender consciences” so long as they did not disquiet the kingdom. On May 1, 1660 this declaration was accepted by Parliament. Charles returned to England at the end of May 1660 with his chief civil minister being Edward Hyde, who became the Earl of Clarendon. Hyde first sought a political settlement with the new Parliament. Later, however, he moved to end the Non-Conformists’ hopes of religious toleration by re-instituting the bishops and the *Book of Common Prayer*.

#### NEGOTIATIONS CONCERNING THE CHURCH

The outstanding question of this turn of events was the religious provision in his declaration concerning “tender consciences.” Earlier this term meant scruples of individual ministers that could not follow everything the *Book of Common Prayer* prescribed, but by the 1650’s this meant entire congregations outside the established Church.

Since Charles needed the support of the Presbyterians he appointed some of them as chaplains while offering others bishoprics, which they refused. Soon after, the Presbyterians asked for the *Book of Common Prayer* to be modified. Discussion of the issue was promised in a conference. This led the Independents and Baptists to petition for toleration, which led the Presbyterian Baxter to speak against toleration for Independents and Baptists on the grounds that it would open toleration for Catholics and Socinians as well.

In the spring of 1661 the Savoy Conference was held to discuss revising the *Book of Common Prayer*. While the Presbyterians were divided with some looking to Scotland as the pattern for a Presbyterian Church,

some looking for a simplified Anglicanism, and others, such as Thomas Manton, Edward Reynolds, Edmund Calamny, and Richard Baxter, looking for a place within the Church of England, the Anglicans were unified in their desire for a revived Church of England as it was under Laud’s leadership before the Civil War.

Gilbert Sheldon, bishop of London and later Archbishop of Canterbury, led the Anglican delegation while Baxter and Manton led the Presbyterians. Sheldon’s starting-point was that the Presbyterians needed to produce objections to the *Book of Common Prayer*. The Conference was then put on hold until Baxter came back with a completely new Prayer Book. Baxter called it a discussion paper but it was used as evidence that the Presbyterians sought complete change in the church. By May 1661 the new Parliament was overwhelmingly Anglican and no longer needed the Presbyterians. This led Baxter’s proposal to be taken from the hands of the Conference and put into the jurisdiction of the Convocation, which was the overseeing body of the Church of England and made up of Anglicans.

#### THE CLARENDON CODE

The political result of the restoration was the “Clarendon Code.” Although this is a nineteenth century designation, it describes a series of four legal statutes led by the aforementioned Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, which were passed between 1661–65. These laws effectively re-established the supremacy of the Anglican Church and ended toleration for dissenters.

The first statute was the Corporation Act (1661). This required all municipal officials to take communion in an Anglican church and formally to reject the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643. The effect of this act was to exclude Non-Conformists from public office.

The second statute was the Act of Uniformity (1662). This Act “commanded” use of the *Book of Common Prayer* in religious service, whereas the Elizabethan Act of Uniformity (1559) “authorized” its use. It also set up three tests for the clergy: first, a liturgical test that all clergy were to swear an oath of agreement with everything in the *Book of Common Prayer*; second, a political test that all clergy were to renounce the Solemn League and Covenant; and third, an ordination test that all clergy not ordained by a bishop must be re-ordained. These tests were to be done by St. Bartholomew’s Day on August 24 although the Act was not even published until August. St. Bartholomew’s Day was the day that annual tithes were collected and that ministers were paid. The result of the Act of Uniformity was that over two

thousand clergy (1,819 Presbyterians, 194 Independents, and 19 Baptists) refused to comply and were forced to resign their livings. August 24 became known as “Black Bartholomew’s Day” and “The Great Ejection.”

The third statute was the First Conventicle Act (1664). This Act forbade conventicles of more than five people other than one’s own household. The purpose was to prevent dissenting religious groups from meeting.

The fourth and final of the statutes was the Five-Mile Act (1665). This Act was aimed at Non-Conformist ministers, who were forbidden from coming within five miles of incorporated towns or the place of their former livings. They were also forbidden to teach in schools. In this year, though, seventy thousand people out of the population of five hundred thousand in London died from Bubonic Plague. While many ministers and even the King and his court fled, many ejected clergy went back and began ministering to the sick in their former parishes. These were the tumultuous times in which John Owen wrote his 1662 treatise, *A Discourse Concerning Liturgies, and Their Imposition*.

#### ANALYSIS OF OWEN’S DISCOURSE CHRIST’S FREEDOM FROM THE LAWS OF MOSES AND MEN

In *chapter one*, Owen compared and contrasted liturgy under the Mosaic economy with that under the New Covenant. The worship of the church under Moses was “in their nature *carnal*, and for their number *many*, on both accounts *burdensome*.”<sup>10</sup> Because the teachers of the people of Israel were not “able to see to the end of the things that were to be done away,” they “increased those institutions, both in number and weight, with sundry inventions of their own” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:3).

When the Lord appeared, he “confirmed and pressed frequently on the consciences of men” the regulations of the Mosaic Law (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:4). This law was to remain in force until his resurrection. On the contrary, as a true “minister of Circumcision,” the Lord “utterly rejected” the laws of the teachers (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:4). Christ’s announcement of freedom from the laws of the scribes and Pharisees Owen described in this way:

And this was the first dawning of liberty that, with the rising of this Day-star, did appear to the burdened and

languishing consciences of men. He freed them, by his teaching, from the bondage of Pharisaical, arbitrary impositions, delivering their consciences from subjection to any thing in the worship of God but his own immediate authority (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:4).

Yet what of the Mosaic laws of worship? Owen went on to speak of freedom from them when he said,

In his death was the procurement of the liberty of his disciples completely finished, as unto conscience; the *supposed* obligation of men’s traditions, and the *real* obligation of Mosaical institutions, being by him (the first as a prophet in his teaching, the last as a priest in his offering) dissolved and taken away (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:4).

It was from “that day”—the time of Christ’s death and resurrection—that “all the disciples of Christ were taken under his immediate lordship, and made free to the end of the world from all obligations in conscience unto any thing in the worship of God but what is of his own institution and command” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:4–5). This principle of worship *according to the commandment of God* was the same in the New Covenant as it was in the Old Covenant. Owen expounded this principle under the rubric of the second Commandment consistent with the rest of the Reformed tradition. In his earlier treatise, *Communion with God* (1657), he expressed this principle in relation to the second Commandment:

*They will receive nothing, practise [sic] nothing, own nothing, in his worship, but what is of his appointment.* They know that from the ... foundation of the world he never did allow, nor ever will, that in any thing the will of the creatures should be the measure of his honour or the principle of his worship, either as to the matter or the manner ... I shall take leave to say what is upon my heart, and what (the Lord assisting) I shall willingly endeavor to make good against all the world,—namely, that that principle *that the Church hath power to institute and appoint any thing or ceremony belonging to the worship of God*, either as to matter or to manner, beyond the orderly observance of such circumstances as necessarily attend such ordinances as Christ himself hath instituted, *lies at the bottom of all the horrible superstition and idolatry, of all the confusion, blood, persecution, and wars*, that have for so long a season spread themselves over the face of the Christian world ... This, then, they who hold communion with Christ are

10. John Owen, “A Discourse Concerning Liturgies, and Their Imposition,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 16 vols. (1850–53; Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted 1965) 15:3. Hereafter, Owen, *Discourse*.

careful of:—they will admit of nothing, practise nothing, in the worship of God, private or public, but what they have his warrant for; unless it comes in his name, with “Thus saith the Lord Jesus”, they will not hear an angel from heaven.<sup>11</sup>

In this, Owen was characteristic of “Puritanism” as described by John Gere in his *The Character of an Old English Puritan or Non-Conformist* (1646):

The Old English Puritan was such an one, that honored God above all, and under God gave every one his due. His first care was to serve God, and therein he did not what was good in his own, but in God’s sight, *making the word of God the rule of his worship*. He highly esteemed order in the House of God: *but would not under colour of that submit to superstitious rites, which are superfluous, and perish in their use*. He revered Authority keeping within its sphere: *but durst not under pretence of subjection to the higher powers, worship God after the traditions of men*. He made conscience of all God’s ordinances, though some he esteemed of more consequence . . . He was much in prayer; with it he began and closed the day. In it he was much exercised in his closet, family and public assembly. *He esteemed that manner of prayer best, where by the gift of God, expressions were varied according to present wants and occasions; yet did he not account set forms unlawful. Therefore in that circumstance of the church he did not wholly reject the liturgy, but the corruption of it* (Emphasis added).

At this point in his *Discourse*, Owen takes up the interesting issue of the apostolic period and the continuation of the Mosaic ceremonies, not only among the Jews who rejected Christ, but also among the disciples of the Lord who were Jews. These latter were those who, “falling under powerful convictions of his doctrines and miracles, believed on him, did yet pertinaciously adhere to their old ceremonial worship” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:5).<sup>12</sup> Owen speaks of the Lord’s response to this situation. He who was so powerful in giving liberty to his people was also liberal in his mercy:

In his infinite wisdom and condescension, [God] waived the whole contest for a season . . . it pleased him, in a way of connivance and forbearance, to continue unto that people an allowance of the observance of their old worship until the time appointed for its utter removal and actual casting away should come (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:5).

During this time the disciples of Christ and the apostles, even, joined with the congregation of Israel in participating in the ceremonies of the temple “until the appointed season of the utter rejection and destruction of the apostate churches was come” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:6). This was the occasion of the emergence of Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles “to lay open the whole mystery of that liberty given by Christ to his disciples from the law” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:6). Eventually, this debate “was buried in the ruins of the city and temple” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:7).

Owen concludes chapter one, using the ancient dictum, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, to make his point about Christ’s righteousness leading to freedom in worship as opposed to seeking one’s own righteousness leading to ceremonies in worship:

As ignorance of the righteousness of God, with a desire to establish their own, did in any take place, so also did endeavours after an outward, ceremonious worship: for these things do mutually further and strengthen each other; and commonly proportionable unto men’s darkness in the mystery of the righteousness of God in Christ, is their zeal for a worldly sanctuary and carnal ordinances (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:7).

What Rome did was similar to what the Jews did in the time of the apostles. Yet the one who has been freed from the law by Christ’s righteousness “is immediately sensible of a delivery from its [pompous worship] yoke, which he freely embraceth” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:8).

#### CHRIST’S INSTITUTED ORDINANCES

In *chapter two*, Owen returned to where he began in chapter one, when he spoke of the ordinances of worship under Moses being *many* and *burdensome*, contrasting those ordinances instituted under Christ in the New Covenant (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:8). He returned to this theme when he said, “The worship of God is either moral and internal, or external and of sovereign or arbitrary institution” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:8). In chapter two he takes up the external worship of God and its sovereign institution by Christ, which has discharged

11. John Owen, “Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation,” in *Works* 2:150, 151.

12. The seventeenth century word, *pertinacious*, comes from the Latin *pertinax*, meaning, “obstinate, persistent, firm, tenacious, constant.” Leo F. Stelton, *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995) 194.

his disciples “from all obligations to aught else whatever but only what he should appoint” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:8).

First, as opposed to the many burdensome ordinances under Moses, the ordinances under Christ are “few and easy to be observed” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:8; emphasis in original). The Lord desired his disciples to be willing and ready to observe his worship and not to “burden them with observances, either for nature or number, like or comparable unto them from which he purchased them liberty” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:9). It is this freedom that is the root of the New Covenant ordinances:

For whereas he is the Lord of his church, to whom the consciences of his disciples are in an unquestionable subjection, and who can give power and efficacy to his institutions to make them useful to their souls, yet when some of their fellow-servants came, I know not how, to apprehend themselves enabled to impose arbitrarily their appointments, for reasons seeming good to their wisdom, they might have been counted moderate if they had not given above ten commandments for his one (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:9).

Second, Christ’s ordinances had “an aptness to be serviceable unto the significancy whereunto they were appointed by him” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:9; emphasis in original). The reason this “eternally severs [his disciples] from all things of men’s invention” is that “whatever they shall appoint in the worship of God can have no significancy at all . . . for want of a Christ-like authority in their institution” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:9, 10).

Owen, then, explained what the ordinances instituted by Jesus Christ for worship were in the “chiefest acts”: “preaching of the word, administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of discipline” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:10). Further, these were to be administered: “with prayer and thanksgiving” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:10). Finally, pastors and teachers administered these ordinances, being “enabled thereunto, so as the end by him aimed at, of the edification of his disciples and the glory of God, might be attained” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:10). These pastors and teachers do this “by such spiritual abilities . . . as will answer the mind Christ” and “by the prescription of a form of words, whose reading and pronunciation in these administrations should outwardly serve as to all the ends of the prayer and thanksgiving required in them” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:10).

At this point in the argument, Owen left this second aspect, the question of the form of words pastors and teachers are to use in administering Christ’s ordinances, and takes up the first, that of the spiritual abilities they have. Christ has given pastors and teachers to the Church (Eph. 4:7, 8, 11–13) as the means whereby he builds up the Church by “the faithful, regular, and effectual discharge of the work of the ministry” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:11). How, though, are these ministers able to do this? Paul declares in Ephesians 4 that it “is by the communication of grace and spiritual gifts from heaven unto them by Christ himself” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:11).<sup>13</sup> Here Owen drew an analogy between the Levites of the Old Testament and the ministers of the New:

He that enabled the shoulders of the Levites to bear the ark of old, and their arms to slay the sacrifices . . . hath, upon their removal, and the institution of the spiritual worship of the gospel, undertaken to supply the administrators of it with spiritual strength and abilities for the discharge of their work, allowing them supply of the defect of that which he hath taken upon himself to perform (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:11).

Owen returned to this idea of ministerial gifts often, especially in chapters nine and ten. At this point, though, he concluded chapter two summarizing the question at issue:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, then, having delivered his disciples from the yoke of Mosaical institutions, which lay upon them from of old; as also from being entangled in their consciences by or from any inventions of men imposed on them; giving them rules for the practice of the liberty whereunto by him they were vindicated, taking them for the future into his own sole disposal in all things concerning the worship of God, he appoints, in his sovereign authority, both the ordinances which he will have alone observed in his church, and the persons by whom they are to be administered; [and] furnishing them with spiritual abilities to that end and purpose, promising his presence with them to the end of the world, commands them to set such, in his name and strength, in the way and unto the work that he hath allotted to them (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:12).

#### THE LORD’S PRAYER AND FORMS OF PRAYER

In *chapter three* Owen returned to an unresolved point he mentioned in chapter two, namely, that ministers

13. Cf. “Sermon III,” in *Works* 9:431–41.

build up the Church “by the prescription of a form of words” in order to administer Christ’s ordinances of word, sacraments, and discipline (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:10). To do this, he set forth the Prelates “proof” that the Lord’s Prayer was a divine mandate for prescribed liturgies.

Generally speaking, Owen said, orthodox divines explained that our Lord’s Prayer had two aims. First, that Christ’s disciples “might have a summary symbol of all the most excellent things they were to ask of God in his name, and so a rule of squaring all their desires and supplications by” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:13). The second aim, of which “all men are not agreed in their judgments,” was that “for their benefit and advantage, together with other intercessions that they should also use the repetition of those words, as a prescript form wherein he had comprised the matter of their requests and petitions” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:13). Despite this disagreement among theologians on the second aim of the Lord’s Prayer, Owen said, “Let it, therefore, be taken for granted that our Savior did command that form to be repeated by his disciples.”

Those whom Owen argued against supposed that this second aim of the Lord’s Prayer meant that it was a mandate for prescribed prayers and liturgies. Owen’s answer was one that may sound like a modern Dispensationalist to us: since our Lord came under the Law, had not yet been glorified, and had not yet sent his Spirit to enable his disciples to perform his spiritual worship, the Lord’s Prayer “belonged unto the economy of the Old Covenant” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:14). In fact, Owen argued, even those who concluded that this prayer was a prescription admitted that Jesus’ prayer was patterned after prayers in use by Jewish synagogues. He concludes that even if our Lord prescribed this prayer to be repeated by his disciples to the end of the world, “yet it doth not appear how, from all these concessions, any argument can be drawn to the composition and imposition of liturgies,” since this prayer was intended “not primarily as to the public worship of the assemblies of his disciples, but as to the guidance of every individual saint in his private devotion, Matt. vi. 6–8” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:14, 15). Owen concluded this chapter with a bit of sarcasm when he said,

Why, then, it is supposed that this will follow,—That it is not only lawful, but the duty of some men to compose other forms, a hundred times as many, suited in their judgment to the due administration of all ordinances of worship in particular, imposing them on the evangelical administrators of those ordinances to be read by them,

with a severe interdiction of the use of any other prayers in those administrations (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:15).

Owen’s point was that the Lord’s Prayer was just that, a prayer, and not a prescription for an entire liturgy imposed on ministers against the freedom that Christ won from the tyrant of Mosaic laws as well as man-made laws in worship.

#### THE LITURGICAL PRACTICE OF THE APOSTLES

Chapter four addresses the practice of the apostles, which, Owen said, was “the best interpretation of the mind of the Lord Jesus Christ as to the ‘agenda’ of the church” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:16). From the outset Owen stated his thesis on this question: “That they used any liturgies in the church-worship, wherein they went at any time before the disciples, cannot with any colour of proof be pretended” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:16). As an example of this, Owen said that while there are many of the apostles prayers recorded in Scripture, if any of them were forms of prayer “how came the memory of them utterly to perish from off the earth?” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:16) In a moment of sarcastic humor, Owen said that those who believed St. Peter composed forms of prayer and homilies for the disciples “must fetch his evidence out of the same authors that he used who affirmed that Jesus Christ himself went up and down singing masses!” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:16)

The objection to which Owen set out to respond to was that the apostles *were* apostles and therefore had extraordinary gifts, while ordinary ministers do not have these gifts. Owen pointed out the freedom that the successors of the apostles had since they, too, were to administer Christ’s ordinances “by virtue of the gifts they had received to that purpose, according to the limits of their commission” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:16). The apostles, then, did not use liturgies in the sense of prescribed and required forms of prayer, nor did the pastors who followed them. Here we see the thesis of this paper in Owen’s own words that his liturgical ideas were rooted in his view of Christian freedom:

Thus far, then, is the *liberty given by Christ* unto his church preserved entire; and the request seems not immodest that is made for the continuance of it. When men cry to God for *the liberty in his worship which was left unto them by Christ and his apostles*, he will undoubtedly hear, though their fellow-servants should be deaf to the like requests made unto them; and truly they must have a great confidence in their own wisdom and

sufficiency, who will undertake to appoint, and impose on others, the observation of things in the worship of God which neither our Lord Jesus nor his apostles did appoint or impose (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:17; emphasis added).

At this point, Owen addressed the two principle grounds adduced for the *imposition* of liturgies. It is important to note this well, for later in his *Discourse* Owen will say the point at issue is not a liturgy, but the *imposition* of a liturgy (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:21, 33).<sup>14</sup> After all, it was the practice of the Reformed churches to have liturgies, such as John Calvin's *Form of Prayers* (1542), John Knox's *The Forme of Prayer and Ministration of the Sacraments Used in the English Congregation in Geneva* (1556), the Heidelberg Liturgy (1563), the Westminster Assembly's *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (1644), and Richard Baxter's *Reformed Liturgy* (1661).<sup>15</sup>

Here is another point in which Douglas Jones misses Owens' argument. Owen does not argue for uniformity in liturgy, as Jones asserts, since Owen went on to say that in all the apostles' exhortations to unity, they never reference liturgy (Jones, 114). Jones, further, seeks to counter Owen, saying research shows that the early liturgies of the apostles' day were uniform, although he offers no footnote (Jones, 116–17).

The first supposition of those who desired to impose a liturgy was that the ministers of England had a disability "to celebrate and administer the ordinances of the gospel, to the honour of God and edification of the church, without the use of them" (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:17). Owen responded in the following way. If the bishops and pastors after the apostles did not need forms of prayer, from where did their ability to pray and lead the people of God come? If their ability came from Jesus Christ, did these ordinary bishops and pastors have

14. Cf. "A Discourse of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer," in *Works* 4:241.

15. Charles W. Baird recorded the thoughts of John Calvin on the necessity of an approved liturgy in his classic work, *The Presbyterian Liturgies: Historical Sketches* (1855; Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, reprinted 2006) 23:

I highly approve of it that there be a certain form, from which the ministers be not allowed to vary: that first, some provision be made to help the simplicity and unskillfulness of some; secondly, that the consent and harmony of the churches one with another may appear; and lastly, that the capricious giddiness and levity of such as affect innovations may be prevented. To which end I have showed that a catechism will be very useful. Therefore there ought to be a stated catechism, a stated form of prayer, and administration of the sacraments. [Ed. Cf. *The Confessional Presbyterian* 2 (2006) 106.]

any gifts beyond what Jesus promised? Moreover, if this was the case with these ordinary ministers, did Jesus promise these gifts for all ordinary ministers to the end of the world? (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:17–18)

The second argument offered in favor of an imposed liturgy was the necessity of uniformity in worship. In reply, Owen conceded that the apostles took great care to speak of the unity of the churches: "Great weight everywhere they lay upon this duty of the churches, and propose unto them the ways whereby it may be done, with multiplied commands and exhortations to attend unto them" (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:18). Yet, Owen, said, where did the apostles assert that uniformity in worship is the means to attain the end of unity?

It cannot but seem strange to some, that this should be the only expedient for that uniformity which is acceptable unto God, and yet not once come into the thoughts of any of the apostles of Christ, so as to be commended unto the churches for that purpose (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:18).

While we do not see uniformity in liturgy as a means of unifying the people of God in the New Testament, we see it among the heathens, as Owen cited the example of the ancient Roman Consul Sp. Posthumius (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:19).

Owen went on to reassert the freedom of the Christian minister from imposed liturgies, which was his purpose in writing his *Discourse*:

At least it seems, as was said, not an unreasonable request, to ask humbly and peaceably at the hands of any of the sons of men, that they would be pleased to allow unto ministers of the gospel that are sound in the faith, and known to be so, who will willingly submit the trial of their ministerial abilities to the judgment of any who are taught of God, and enabled to discern them aright, that liberty in the worship of God which was confessedly left unto them by Christ and his apostles (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:19).

But what of the ancient liturgies ascribed to the apostles, such as James, Peter, Matthew, and Mark? Owen's response is harsh: "They must be strangers to the spirit, doctrine, and writings of the apostles, who can impose such trash upon them as these liturgies are stuffed withal" (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:20). Besides, Owen lists six arguments against their antiquity to the days of the apostles: first, there are words used not known in the days of the apostles; second, there are parts in

them that are known to have entered many years later; third, the mention of things not even dreamed of in the days of the apostles; fourth, the remembrance of those supposed to be their authors in these liturgies; fifth, the preference of other liturgies to them when these came into use; and sixth, the silence of the first Christian writers and councils concerning them (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:20).

#### THE LITURGICAL PRACTICE OF THE ANCIENT CHURCH

Owen moved forward in church history from the days of the apostles, in *chapter five*, to the first three centuries to investigate the early use or non-use of liturgies. He again reiterated one of his themes, when he opened this chapter:

It is not about stinted forms of prayer in the worship and service of God, by those who, of their own accord, do make use of that kind of assistance, judging that course to be better than any thing they can do themselves in the discharge of the work of the ministry, but of the imposition of forms on others who desire “to stand fast in the liberty with which Christ hath made them free,” that we inquire (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:21).

The inquiry into these centuries is important because “the streams of gospel institutions did run more clear and pure from human mixtures” in those centuries than in later centuries (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:21). As evidence of his thesis that there was not “any attempt to invent, frame, and compose any liturgies for prescribed forms of administering the ordinances of the gospel,” Owen cites the Roman cardinal, Baronius, who, in explaining the ancient churches’ practice of prayer, “is wholly silent as to the use of any forms amongst them” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:21, 22). In fact, Owen evidenced his own handle of patristic literature when he said the writings of Eusebius, Polycarp, Clement, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian and their many contemporaries do not evidence the imposition of liturgies as he was arguing against (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:22).

At this point he goes on to deal with specifics in some of the writings of the fathers. He cites Origen (*Homil. xi in Hierimeia*), Tertullian (*Apology* 29, 30), and Justin (*Apology*), concluding that the prayers they mention were not imposed, but descriptions of prayers that were offered. Justin even speaks of prayer “according to our abilities” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:22, 23).

Owen concluded chapters 4 and 5 when he said,

“That the composition and imposition of liturgies, to be necessarily used or used in the administration of the ordinances of the gospel, is destitute of any plea or pretence, from Scripture or antiquity” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:24).

#### THE LITURGICAL PRACTICE OF THE ANCIENT CHURCH (CONTINUED)

*Chapter six* deals with the assertion that liturgies are ancient. Owen opened with a statement that if any could prove him wrong, he would be “much engaged” to them. Yet, he would have nothing of those trying to impose a liturgy on him with ambiguous words of the ancients or by citing a particular prayer as if it had the force of necessitating an entire liturgy (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:25). Owen’s aversion to imposed liturgies is stated when he said, “For my part, I know of not any thing that ever obtained a practice and observation among Christians, whose springs are more dark and obscure than those of liturgies” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:25). Instead, the ancient churches did not impose them in any councils nor have uniformity, but “every church seemeth to have done what seemed good in the church’s own eyes, after once the way unto the use of them was opened” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:25).

The Greek liturgies named after Chrysostom and Basil were collected over time and “the use of them being arbitrarily introduced was not, by any injunction we find, made necessary” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:26). In the Latin churches, Ambrose used one form, Gregory another, and Isidore another. Owen concluded that every bishop’s region had their own practice well into the fourth century, even as he cites an African council’s decision for their own region to that effect (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:26).

Yet many still argued for an imposed liturgy. Their first reason was that of necessity since there were men in the ministry without the gifts needed to edify the church, and so others “were enforced to compose such forms for their use as they judged expedient” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:26). Besides, the second reason liturgies began to be solidified was that in the east there were many antitrinitarian heretics, only increasing the need for forms of public worship. Evidence of this point is that the so-called “Liturgy of St. James” includes the words *homousios* and *theotokos*—that Owen pointed out were words not standardized in the churches until Nicea in 325 and Ephesus in 431 (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:27).

Owen proceeded to draw out the logic behind the argument that liturgies were necessary because of the

lack of ability of ministers. Owen said this either is blasphemy, because it means Jesus no longer gifts his church as he did in days of old—as he had promised—or that those in the ministry without such gifts were negligent and careless in not improving whatever gifts they did have. Because of this last conclusion, Owen said, “I wish, then, we might, in the fear of the Lord, consider whether the remedy were well suited unto the disease” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:27). This led Owen to express his experimental theology:

I suppose all impartial men will grant that there ought to have been a return unto Him endeavoured from whom that were gone astray ... Finding themselves at the loss wherein they were, should they not have searched their hearts and ways, to consider wherefore it was that the presence of Christ was so withdrawn from them, that they were so left without the assistance which other ministering in their places before them had received? Should not they have pulled out their single talent, and fallen to trading with it, that it might have increased under their care? Was not this the remedy and cure of the breach made by them, that God and man expected from them? Was it just, then, and according to the mind of Christ, that, instead of an humble returnal unto a holy, evangelical dependence on himself, they should invent an expedient to support them in the condition wherein they were, and so make all such returnal for hereafter needless? (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:27–28).

What they invented, Owen went on to say, were liturgies “to justify themselves in their spiritual negligence and sloth, and to render a dependence on the Lord Christ for supplies of his Spirit, to enable them unto gospel administrations, altogether needless” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:28).

As for the second reason given for liturgies, namely, false teaching, Owen succinctly replied that there were many antichrists in the apostles’ time “who never thought of this engine for their discovery or exclusion out of the church” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:28). Instead, the apostles and early church developed creeds to protect the church from error and keep unity in doctrine.

Owen then went into a section dealing with the fact that liturgies spread in the western church by the power of the Papacy and how the Reformers responded. Owen spoke in glowing terms of those who brought the gospel to England, which lodged in the heart of Edward VI and some of his counselors. Yet these were hindered in reforming by clergy, nobility, the ignorance of the laity, and the nations around that were inspired by the Papacy.

Because of this “our wise and prudent reformers” chose to address the credenda of the church before the agenda. They hoped purity of doctrine would lead to purity in worship as well as conversion of priests. With all this history Owen concluded:

The Book of Common Prayer being composed as hath been declared, became from its very cradle and infancy a bone of contention to the church of God in this nation ... And I should pursue the suffrage that hath lain against it, from the first day of its composure to this wherein we live, never giving it a quiet possession in the minds and consciences of men, with the various evils that have all along attended its imposition ... so that there seems to be no way to secure its station but by an opposition unto them and extirpation of them; which is a sad work for any that are called Christians to engage into (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:32).

Owen saw the day coming called the “Great Ejection,” knowing that his arguments would not convince all. Yet, he labored in the knowledge of another Day, which led him to continue his *Discourse* by examining liturgies “by that infallible rule by which both we and they must be judged another day” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:32).

#### ARGUMENT AGAINST IMPOSITION: AUTHORITY

*Chapter seven*, Owens’ longest, begins his arguments against the imposition of liturgies. The question at hand is re-stated by setting aside certain issues in order to narrow the argument to the main issue. He did not want to deal with the Book of Common Prayer, in particular—its roots in the law, its establishment, its failings, its similarity to the Roman offices—nor with the directive parts of the liturgy such as the reading of Scripture and forms of prayer to accompany the administration of the gospel ordinances—things which Owen did not oppose. Instead, Owen sought to deal particularly with

the composing of forms of prayer in the worship of God, in all gospel administrations, to be used by the ministers of the churches, in all public assemblies, by a precise reading of the words prescribed unto them, with commands for the reading of other things, which they are not to omit, upon the penalty contained in the sanction of the whole service and the several parts of it (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:33).

This being the state of the question, Owen proceeded to offer “reasons that evidently declare the imposition

and use of such a liturgy or form of public words to be contrary to the rule of the word, and consequently sinful” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:33).

His first reason (the second coming in chapter nine), deals with the question of by whose authority a liturgy may be prescribed upon the churches:

The arbitrary invention of any thing, with commands for its necessary and indispensable use in the public worship of God, as a part of that worship, and the use of any thing so invented and so commanded in that worship, is unlawful, and contrary to the rule of the word (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:33–34).

In sum, any prescribed liturgy apart from the Word is “an invention of men, not appointed, not commanded of God” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:34). This liturgy contains three assumptions. First, there is no command of God either for the Book of Common Prayer in particular or for any such liturgy in general. Second, it is made necessary by the commands of men. Owen boldly stated at this point, “Let it [the fact that it is necessary] be denied, and there is an end of all this strife.” In fact, Owen went on to say,

I shall not dispute about other men’s practice. They who are willing to take it upon their consciences that the best way to serve God in the church, or the best ability that they have for the discharge of their duty therein, consists in the reading of such a book (for I suppose they will grant that they ought to serve God with the best they have), shall not by me be opposed in their way and practice. *It is only about imposition, and the necessity of its observance by virtue of that imposition, that we discourse* (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:34; emphasis added).

Here Owen showed the practical effect of his beliefs in religious toleration. He desired a church in which one minister could use prescribed forms while the other could pray extemporaneously.

The third assumption of the liturgy, which Owen posed in the form of a question, is whether using a prescribed liturgy makes it a part of the worship of God? What Owen means is this: if worship cannot be offered except by a particular liturgy or by a particular form of prayer, then that liturgy or prayer is itself a part of God’s commanded worship. On the contrary, Owen asserted,

Prayer is the worship of God; but that *this prayer* shall be used and no other is only a circumstance of it so that

though it may be possibly accounted a circumstance or accidental part of God’s worship, yet it is not asserted to be of the substance of it (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:35; emphasis in original).

Here Owen invoked the classic distinction between the circumstances and the substance (i.e., elements) of worship. Circumstances are those things that “follow actions as actions, or such as are arbitrarily superadded and adjoined by command unto actions, which do not of their own accord, nor naturally nor necessarily attend them” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:35). These actions, further, “may be ordered, disposed of, and regulated by the prudence of men” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:35). These circumstances pertain to time, place, and sundry other things for order and convenience. When men command that prayer must be done toward an image, or to the east, or with a certain form, then these circumstances become of the substance of prayer (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:36).

Under the Old Covenant there were certain circumstances God prescribed that were a part of the substance of worship, such as sacrificing on the altar at the tabernacle and temple alone, praising God in certain seasons, the use of musical instruments. In the same way, to prescribe along with prayer certain circumstances makes them a part of prayer, and without them, prayer is not offered (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:37).

At this point Owen inquired about “whether such additions to or in the worship of God, besides or beyond his own institution and appointment, be allowable, or lawful to be practiced” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:37). Owen cited a litany of biblical texts and then went on to explain their meaning to the question at hand. He cited Exodus 20:4–5; Deuteronomy 4:2, 12:32; Proverbs 30:6; Jeremiah 7:31; Matthew 15:9, 13; Mark 7:7–8, and Revelation 22:18; as well as references to many others parenthetically, such as Leviticus 10:1–3; Joshua 22:10; Judges 8:24; 2 Kings 16:11–12, and 1 Chronicles 15:13 (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:37–38). He mentioned that the texts of the Old Testament are just as authoritative and binding as those in the New unless God revokes them. All these texts teach us,

That the will of God is the sole rule of his worship, and all the concernment of it, and that his authority is the sole principle and cause of the relation of any thing to his worship in a religious manner; and consequently, that he never did, nor ever will, allow that the wills of his creatures should be the rule or measure of his honour or worship, nor that their authority should cause any thing to hold a new relation unto him, or any other

but what it hath by the law of its creation (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:38–39).

Owen invoked not only the sufficiency of Scripture for worship but also the distinction between the Creator and the creature in this argument. The Lord's authority to command his own worship is asserted in the words, "My words," and, "What I have commanded." To combat the sinful nature of man in imposing his own worship, God used prohibitive words such as, "Thou shalt not add to what I have commanded." The weight of the sin of adding to his worship is signified in the words, "You shall add nothing to what I have instituted," and, "You have done what I commanded you not." In response to those who said these words were to regulate only that which was contrary to God's appointment, Owen cited our Lord: "Teach men to observe whatever I command them."

Owen summarized his argument when he said, "The whole duty, then, of the church, as unto the worship of God, seems to lie in the precise observation of what is appointed and commanded by him" (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:42). In terms of the Book of Common Prayer, this meant,

On these and no better terms is that prescribed liturgy we treat of introduced and imposed. It comes from man, with authority to be added to the worship that Christ requires, and ventures on all the sever interdictions of such additions, armed only with the pretence of not being contrary to any particular command in the matter of it (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:42).

#### ARGUMENT AGAINST IMPOSITION: AUTHORITY (CONTINUED)

In *chapter eight* Owen continued his first argument against the imposition of liturgies of the authority to impose them. All the commands and prohibitions of the foregoing chapter imply two things: the authority and rule by which worship may be commanded.

Since "all authority is originally in God" there are two ways "he is pleased to exert it" (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:43). First, he exerts his authority mediately "by a delegation of authority unto some persons" (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:43). Examples of this are kings and authorities, who are ordained of God and whom we must obey. This obedience "in things good and lawful" is not because of authority vested in them, but from the "command of God" (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:43). This obedience is not

religious but civil obedience. Second, God exerts his authority immediately "either directly from heaven, as in the giving of the law, or by the inspiration of others to declare his will; unto both which his word written answereth" (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:43). Obedience to these commands is our religious duty. In response to those who say this authority is vested in the church, Owen made the analogy that the church in this case is like the king mentioned above. Therefore, obedience to their liturgy is a civil obedience, not a religious obedience (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:44).

On the contrary, the immediate power to impose is Christ's, whereby he told his disciples, "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded." Therefore, when someone teaches beyond Christ's commands it is

not by virtue of any commission from him; what we do beyond what he hath commanded, we do it not in obedience to him;—what they so teach, they do it in their own name, not his; what we so do, we do in our own strength, not his, nor to his glory (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:45).

Having dealt with the authority to impose, Owen moved to the rule by which impositions are judged. He did this by citing the Roman apologist and polemicist Robert Bellarmine, who said alongside of Christ's authority was the church's authority, and both of which we are to obey. In response, Owen said, "Now, the whole question is concerning what those church guides may teach and enjoin" (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:45). Obedience to Christ's command in Matthew 28 is the "agenda" of the gospel (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:45).

Let, then, the imposition of a liturgy be tried by this rule. It was never by Christ commanded to his apostles, cannot by any be taught as his command; and therefore men, in the teaching or imposition of it, have no promise of his presence, nor do they that observe it yield any obedience unto him therein (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:45).

Owen concluded with the sober reminder that at Christ's visitation [Second Coming] he will judge according to this rule, namely, his command. Owen expressed his perplexity his contemporaries when he said,

I cannot but admire with what peace and satisfaction to their own souls men can pretend to act as by commission from Christ ... make it their whole business

almost to teach men to do and observe what he never commanded, and rigorously to inquire after and into the observation of their own commands, whilst those of the Lord Jesus are openly neglected (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:45–46).

Not only will these men and their worship one day by judged, but “it is so already sufficiently in the word of truth” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:46).

#### ARGUMENT AGAINST IMPOSITION: CHRIST’S GIFTS

*Chapter nine* is the second argument against an imposed liturgy. Those in favor of a liturgy argue that they provide a means for order and decency as well as edification in administering the gospel ordinances of preaching, sacraments, and prayer. The question Owen sought to answer is “whether Jesus Christ have not made provision for the same end and purpose” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:47).

Owen returned to Ephesians 4:7–13, which he cited in chapter two. Here Paul says Christ has gifted the church with ministers for their edification. Owen, therefore, said,

To say that the provision he hath made is not every way sufficient for the attaining of the end for which it was made by him, or that he continueth not to make the same provision that he did formerly, are equally blasphemous; the one injurious to his wisdom, the other to his truth, both to his love and care of his church (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:48).

The uniformity that the Prelates desired was furnished to the churches in using the same rule of the Word and being gifted with the same Spirit (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:48).

But what of those in the ministry that seem not gifted as others? Owen spoke to this objection in these words:

I shall desire them to consider whether indeed such persons be rightly called unto the ministry, and do labour aright to discharge their duty in that office; seeing that if they are so and do so, there seems to be a direct failure of the promise of Christ, which is blasphemy to imagine (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:48–49).

Further, Owen called men to consider that those who are truly called but do not seem to have the requisite gifts, have neglected “to stir up the gifts that they have

received by the use and exercise of them” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:49). Even more to the points, Owen asked whether the cause of this is not the fact that a liturgy has been imposed upon them (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:49)!

He further desired to investigate whether the gifts Christ has promised and the imposition of a certain liturgy are mutually exclusive. His conclusion was that since a prescribed liturgy is in the reading of certain words without alteration, this cannot be the gift of the ministry that Christ promised to his church to edify them. Therefore the liberty of Christ to pray and preach is taken away (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:50).

#### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Owen concluded this *Discourse* in *chapter ten*. Given that Paul has taught us that edification is the end of the ministry, the only way the ministry edifies the church is “by virtue of his blessing, which is annexed only to his own institutions” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:51). From this Owen drew out an implication: “But this will undeniably hence ensue, that whatever is contrary unto or a hinderance of edification, ought not to be appointed or observed in the worship of God” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:51). What this meant for the controversy in seventeenth century England was that, “If it appear that this is the state and condition of this imposed liturgy in church administrations, I presume it will be confessed that it ought not to obtain any place or room amongst them” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:51).

Since the using of Christ’s gifts edify the church, Owen inquired how these gifts “may be improved, so that they may ‘excel to the edifying of the church,’ which is expressly required of them” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:52). How does a minister do this? “Edification, then, depends on the improvement of gifts, and the improvement of gifts on their due exercise according to the mind of Christ” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:52). Any lack of exercise of these gifts whether by neglect or hindrance of them by others is to hinder the church’s edification. Therefore, the imposed liturgy being a hindrance ought to be removed and taken away (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:53).

Further, the exercise of the ministry is to “declare, unfold, tender, and apply the grace of Christ, according unto the wants of his disciples” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:53). These wants are “very far from being the same, in the same degree, in and unto every congregation, or unto any one congregation at all times, or unto all persons in any congregation” (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:53).

This brought Owen full circle to his opening chapter. The imposition of a liturgy is “an unwarrantable

abridgment of the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free ... for as it is a sin in others to abridge us of the liberty purchased for us by Jesus Christ, so it is in us to give it up, and not suffer in our testimony for it" (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:54). Owen summarized that this freedom of which Paul spoke in Galatians 5:1, and which he expounded throughout his *Discourse*, means that we are freed from "those pedagogical institutions of God himself, which by his own appointment were to continue only to the time of reformation," and from "subjection to the authority of men as to any new impositions in or about the worship of God" (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:54).

Owen then concluded about the controversy concerning the Book of Common Prayer even as Anglican and Presbyterian ministers met to deal with it:

The sum is, That abridgment of the liberty of the disciples of Christ, by impositions on them of things which he hath not appointed, not made necessary by circumstances antecedent unto such impositions, are plain usurpations upon the consciences of the disciples of Christ, destructive of the liberty which he hath purchased for them, and which, if it be their duty to walk according to gospel rule, is sinful to submit unto (Owen, *Discourse*, 15:55).

### CONCLUSION

Throughout his ministry John Owen evidenced this deep-seated belief in religious freedom and toleration both in ecclesiastical and civil affairs. For example, the day after Charles I's beheading on January 30, 1649 Owen was summoned to preach before Parliament. Appended to his sermon on Jeremiah 15:19–20, "Righteous Zeal Encouraged By Divine Protection," was his *Discourse on Toleration*, in which he made the case "that errors in religion are not punishable by the civil magistrate, with the exception of such as in their own nature, not in some man's apprehensions, disturb the order of society" (Thomson, 41).<sup>16</sup> Owen's point was simple: Christ's freedom should lead to religious

toleration. Owen had lived out his belief in the time that he was Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, when he allowed three hundred Anglicans to meet on the Lord's Day for worship using the *Book of Common Prayer*, although Owen had the authority to forbid them (Thomson, 55).<sup>17</sup> Finally, several years later he wrote a letter "To the Governor of the Colony of Massachusetts" because Baptists and Quakers were being persecuted. His words embody his thoughts in his *Discourse*:

We only make it our hearty request that you will trust God with his truth and ways, so far as to suspend all rigorous proceedings in corporeal restraints or punishments on persons that dissent from you, and practice the principles of their dissent without danger or disturbance to the civil peace of the place.<sup>18</sup>

It was this toleration and freedom that Owen hoped to procure in *A Discourse Concerning Liturgies, and Their Imposition*. Behind all that he said was the basic biblical principle that Christ freed the Christian from the Mosaic laws of worship as well as all man-made laws in the worship of their Lord and Savior: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5:1; KJV). ■

16. Cf. Owen, "Two Questions Concerning the Power of the Supreme Magistrate About Religion and the Worship of God, and One About Tithes, Proposed and Resolved," in *Works* 13:509–516; Toon, *God's Statesman*, 119.

17. Cf. Toon, *God's Statesman*, 76–77.

18. "To the Governor of the Colony of Massachusetts," March 25, 1669. *The Correspondence of John Owen (1616–1683)*, ed., Peter Toon (Cambridge, England: James Clarke & Co., 1970).