

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

A Sweet Mystery: John Owen on the Trinity

PAUL SMALLEY

1

The purpose of this article is to summarize John Owen's teaching regarding the Trinity. That is a subject worthy of a book by a scholar after studying Owen for decades. Given that this is a mere article written by a beginning student of Owen, our goal is to explore but not in any way exhaust this great subject.

The article is titled "A Sweet Mystery" to indicate the way John Owen saw the Trinity as a revealed mystery with delightful applications for the Christian experience of God. It will explore the doctrine, the nature, the works, and the experience of the triune God.

The Doctrine of the Triune God

The Trinity was foundational for John Owen's theology, as Richard Muller observed among the Reformed orthodox generally. Owen asserted that if you take away the doctrine of the Trinity "the foundation of all fruits of love and goodness is lost to the soul."¹ Sinclair Ferguson called Owen "a deeply Trinitarian theologian,"² and Carl Trueman writes, "Throughout his works—whether those dealing with God, redemption, or justification—the doctrine of the Trinity is always foundational."³

The Definition of the Doctrine

What did John Owen mean by the Trinity? In his lesser catechism, Owen queried, "Q. *Is there but one God?* A. One only, in respect of his essence and being, but one in three distinct

¹ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 4:145, 148.

² Sinclair Ferguson, "John Owen and the Doctrine of the Person of Christ," *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, ed. Robert W. Oliver (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2002), 82.

³ Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2007), 124.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

persons, of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”⁴ In his greater catechism, he elaborated and provided Scripture references. He defined “person” as “a distinct manner of subsistence or being, distinguished from the other persons by its own properties.” These distinguishing properties he delineated as:

- The Father: the “only fountain of the Godhead.
—John 5:26, 27; Eph. 1:3.”⁵
- The Son: “begotten of his Father from eternity.
—Ps. 2:7; John 1:14, 3:16.”
- The Spirit: “to proceed from the Father and the Son.
—John 14:17, 16:14, 15:26, 20:22.”⁶

In another place Owen summarized the doctrine of the Trinity as follows:

God is one;—that this one God is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost;—that the Father is the Father of the Son; and the Son, the Son of the Father; and the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of the Father and the Son; and that, in respect of this their mutual relations, they are distinct from each other.⁷

Regarding the distinct divine Persons, he wrote,

they are distinct, living, divine, intelligent, voluntary principles of operation or working, and that in and by internal acts one towards another, and in acts that outwardly respect the creation and the several parts of it. Now, this distinction originally lieth in this,—that the Father begetteth the Son, and the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceedeth from both of them.⁸

⁴ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 16 volumes, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965–68), 1:467.

⁵ Owen often referred to the Father as the “fount” or “fountain” in the Godhead, but not as the “cause” of the other divine Persons. In this regard he stood in the same tradition as Thomas Aquinas and the Latin fathers as opposed to Athanasius, Basil, and Theodoret. Aquinas recognized that the language of “cause” could imply that the Son was created, whereas “fount” indicated identical substance. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:46.

⁶ Owen, *Works*, 1: 472.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:377.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:405.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

It is immediately evident that Owen stood in the tradition of Augustine and the great creeds. In fact, Owen quoted Augustine more than any other author.⁹ Augustine himself did not aim to be original, but confessed that all Catholic theologians purpose

to teach, according to the Scriptures, this doctrine, that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit intimate a divine unity of one and the same substance in an indivisible equality; and therefore that they are not three Gods, but one God: although the Father hath begotten the Son, and so He who is the Father is not the Son; and the Son is begotten by the Father, and so He who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but only the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, Himself also co-equal with the Father and the Son, and pertaining to the unity of the Trinity.¹⁰

The Nicene Creed of A.D. 325 had confessed,

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made.... And in the Holy Ghost.¹¹

In A.D. 381, the Constantinopolitan Creed expanded the confession regarding the Holy Spirit to say, “And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.” Later, at the Council of Toledo (A.D. 589), the idea was formally

⁹ Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, 12. Robert Letham writes, “[I]n *On Communion* Owen makes 44 clear citations of church theologians. Augustine leads with 10, then comes Aquinas 7, Tertullian 5, Gregory of Nazianzus 4, and Beza 3. The West outstrips the East by 39–5. Patristic sources account for 27 citations, the medievals 7, while the Reformation and immediate post-Reformation period has 10. Overwhelmingly, most quotations are from the Bible—to count them would be a monumental waste of time” (“John Owen’s Doctrine of the Trinity in Its Catholic Context and Its Significance for Today” [Westminster Conference paper, December 2006], 5, accessed 6–12–09 at www.johnowen.org/media/letham_owen.pdf).

¹⁰ Augustine, “On The Holy Trinity,” trans. Arthur W. Haddan, rev. W. G. T. Shedd, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Volume 3*, ed. Philip Schaff (Albany: AGES Digital Library, 1997), 32 [book 1 chapter 4].

¹¹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 1:28–29.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

introduced that the Holy Spirit “proceedeth from the Father *and the Son* [Latin, *Filioque*],” which was accepted in the Western church but not in Eastern Orthodoxy.¹²

Owen had received this tradition, embraced it, and, as we will see, defended it on the authority of the Scriptures. Carl Trueman writes, “Owen’s clear grasp of the significance of Trinitarianism naturally leads him both to a great respect for the Catholic creeds of the church and to the patristic authors whose works led to the creedal formulations and then explicated and defended such.”¹³

The Mystery of the Doctrine

John Owen viewed the Trinity as a mystery, that is, a secret of God known to man only by His revelation—the written words of Scripture. This may explain why he, together with most of the Reformed orthodox, hesitated to use metaphors drawn from creation or human nature.¹⁴ Owen approached this subject with profound reverence; Richard Daniels observed, “This conviction that the doctrine of the Trinity is an ‘awful mystery’ pervades Owen’s thought.”¹⁵

This mystery severely limits the role of human reason in evaluating the doctrine of the Trinity. Human language and thought cannot determine what is possible for the essence of God. Trueman noted, “[A]s God is infinite, only he can have perfect knowledge of himself.” Apart from what God has revealed, human minds cannot grasp Him and human logic cannot limit Him. Trueman wrote, “This is crucial in Owen when it comes to his defence of the Trinity.”¹⁶

Owen thought nothing “more absurd, foolish, and contrary to sound reason” than to draw philosophical principles from “finite, limited, created things” and force them upon “the infinite, uncreated, essence of God.”¹⁷ Citing John 1:18 and 1 Corinthians 13:12, he wrote, “[A]ll our notions of God are but childish in respect to his infinite perfections. We

¹² Ibid., 29, 26.

¹³ Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, 124.

¹⁴ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:151, 157–58.

¹⁵ Richard Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 95. He is referring to Owen, *Works*, 2:367.

¹⁶ Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, 34–35.

¹⁷ Owen, *Works*, 12:48.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

lisp and babble." He applied this particularly to the Trinity, "a mystery, whose every letter is mysterious."¹⁸

John Owen did not fall into agnosticism, however. He affirmed that we can know the incomprehensible God. Owen was following a theological distinction between archetypal and ectypal theology, a distinction rooted in Thomas Aquinas, modified by Scotus, and mediated through Franciscus Junius. Archetypal theology is God's infinite knowledge of Himself by virtue of His infinite essence. Ectypal theology is the knowledge of God communicated to rational creatures—true, but analogical, for it is a finite communication of the infinite. It is possible because of the image of God in man, but actual only because of God's initiative to reveal Himself in Christ through the Word.¹⁹

5

The mystery of the Trinity pressed Owen to stay close to the words of Scripture. Robert Letham observed, "His trinitarianism is classic and orthodox in the Western sense but he avoids some of its problems. One of the ways he achieves this is by his overwhelmingly biblical approach. There is a remarkable absence of philosophical terminology, a profusion of biblical exegesis."²⁰

Owen recognized that the super-rational quality of the Trinity drove the Socinians to reject the Trinity as contrary to reason. But he said they made the error of assuming "that what is above their reason, is, therefore, contradictory unto true reason."²¹ Much of Owen's writing on the Trinity was directed against the errors of Socinians such as John Biddle.²² But Owen wrote primarily with the purpose of blessing the church.

As we venture onto the holy ground of the nature of the triune God, we repeat Owen's requests to his readers prefixed to his shorter treatise on this subject:

- First, we must not treat this like any ordinary controversy, but one of those "things which immediately and directly in themselves concern the eternal salvation of the souls of men," deserving a "due sense of their weight and importance."

¹⁸ Ibid., 6:65–67.

¹⁹ Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 57–63.

²⁰ Letham, "John Owen's Doctrine of the Trinity in Its Catholic Context and Its Significance for Today," 4.

²¹ Owen, *Works*, 5:47.

²² Ibid., 2:392–93; 12:3–4, 17–41.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

- Second, we must have “a due reverence of the majesty, and infinite, incomprehensible nature of God” which we must adore, not subject to the fallen human reasoning.
- Third, the reader must “be willing to submit his soul and conscience to the plain and obvious sense of Scripture propositions and testimonies.”²³

The Nature of the Triune God

The first propositions of the doctrine of the Trinity are that “God is one” (cf. Deut. 6:4; Isa. 44:6, 8), and that “the Father is God.”²⁴ Since these were not disputed by the Socinians, Owen spent little time defending them. However, the Socinians disputed the orthodox statement that Christ is God. To this Owen gave a strong, biblical defense.

The Deity of the Son

John Owen asserted, “Jesus Christ is God, the eternal Son of God.”²⁵ We can only begin to sample Owen’s arguments for the deity of Jesus Christ;²⁶ he was convinced that the Scriptures plainly revealed this doctrine. In his shorter work on the Trinity, his first line of defense was to quote over three dozen Scriptures and let the Bible speak for itself.²⁷ Six of his examples show New Testament Scriptures quoting Old Testament texts about the Lord God and applying them to Christ.²⁸ Owen gave special attention to John 1:1–3 as a key text revealing Christ’s eternal Deity.²⁹

Owen observed that this Scripture and others ascribe to the Son the titles “God” or “Lord.” The Socinians responded to these texts by saying that Christ is “God” by office

²³ Ibid., 2:368.

²⁴ Ibid., 2:381.

²⁵ Ibid., 2:382.

²⁶ E.g., Ibid., 2:382–97, 413–19; 12:169–333.

²⁷ Ibid., 2:383–86. Owen quoted Ps. 45:6 with Heb. 1:8; Ps. 68:17–18 with Eph. 4:8–10; Ps. 110:1; Ps. 102:25–27 with Heb. 1:10–12; Prov. 8:22–31; Isa. 6:1–3 with John 12:41; Isa. 8:13–14 with Luke 2:34 and Rom. 9:33 and 1 Pet. 2:8; Isa. 9:6; Jer. 23:5–6; Hos. 12:3–5; Zech. 2:8–9; Matt. 16:16; Luke 1:35; John 1:1–3, 14; 3:13; 8:57–58; 10:30; 17:5; 20:28; Acts 20:28; Rom. 1:3–4; 9:5; 14:10–12; 1 Cor. 8:6; 10:9 with Num. 21:6; Phil. 2:5–6; Col. 1:15–17; 1 Tim. 3:16; Tit. 2:13–14; Heb. 1 throughout; 3:4; 1 Pet. 1:11; 3:18–20; 1 John 3:16; 5:20; Rev. 1:8, 11–13, 17; 2:23.

²⁸ See also *ibid.*, 12:173.

²⁹ Ibid., 2:389–97. Also 12:216–22.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

but not by nature, that is, a god appointed by the Father for our worship. To this Owen said that (1) these Scriptures also ascribe God's attributes to Christ, such as eternity or omnipotence; and (2) there is only one God, and to worship any other is cursed idolatry.³⁰

Socinians argued that the Scriptures say Christ was given the title of "Lord" by His Father's appointment at His resurrection. Owen replied that Christ may indeed be called Lord "as mediator," a title of office. But this does not deny that there may also be another sense in which Christ has always been Lord, namely, in "the eternal lordship of Christ, as he is one with his Father, 'God blessed forever,' Rom. 9:5." He is the "one Lord" in the sense of "by whom are all things," which is only true of God the Creator (1 Cor. 8:6). Christ was the "Lord" worshiped by angels at His birth (Luke 2:11; Heb. 1:6).³¹

The English Socinian John Biddle cited John 14:28, Mark 13:32, Mathew 24:36, and 1 Corinthians 15:24, 28 as evidence that Christ was inferior in nature to the Father. The first text is Christ's statement, "the Father is greater than I." Owen's response was that such statements should be understood with respect to Christ's office as mediator (the Lord's servant) or His incarnate nature as man. He compared it to a king's son who shared the "same nature" as his father but could be employed by him in a lesser office as his servant. He also acknowledged, "It is true, there is an order, yea, a subordination, in the persons of the Trinity themselves, whereby the Son, as to his personality, may be said to depend on the Father, being begotten by him."³² Thus Christ is our God (John 20:28) with respect to His sharing the divine essence, but the Father is Christ's God (John 20:17) with respect to eternal sonship and incarnate mediation.³³

Owen's response is very similar to Augustine's response before him. Augustine wrote in his famous book on the Trinity that the Scriptures speak of Christ as equal to the Father in that He exists in "the form of God" but less than the Father insofar as He took "the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:6–7).³⁴ This two-nature view of Christ was explicitly affirmed by the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451).³⁵ Augustine had also explained some subordinationist texts in Scripture as referring to the eternal generation of the Son—His eternal relation to the Father as Son.³⁶

³⁰ Ibid., 2:387–88; 12:86–88, 205, 207–208.

³¹ Ibid., 12:171–74.

³² Ibid., 12:201–202.

³³ Ibid., 12:204.

³⁴ Augustine, "On The Trinity," 38–39, 50 [book 1 chapters 7, 11].

³⁵ See Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:62, for the text.

³⁶ Augustine, "On The Trinity," 64–65 [book 2 chapter 1].

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Therefore Owen defended from Scripture the full deity of Christ, affirming and supporting the Trinitarian tradition of the fathers.

The Deity of the Holy Spirit

Owen also asserted the personal “Deity of the Holy Spirit” against such opponents as Socinians and Quakers.³⁷ Again Owen felt so confident in the clarity of Scripture in this matter that he began with twenty Scripture quotations.³⁸ Then, from the Scriptures Owen made the following arguments that the Holy Spirit is a distinct divine Person:

- a) “He is placed in the same rank” as the Father and the Son (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 12:3–6).
- b) He is called God (Acts 5:3–4) and “Comforter of all God’s people” (John 16:7).
- c) “He hath personal properties,” will and understanding (1 Cor. 12:11; 2:10).
- d) “He is the voluntary author of divine operations,” such as creation (Gen. 1:2), speaking by the prophets (2 Pet. 1:21), and regenerating.
- e) “The same regard is had to him in faith, worship, and obedience, as unto the other persons of the Father and Son” (Matt. 12:31–32; Acts 5:3, 4, 9; 13:2, 4).³⁹

Owen recognized that sometimes Scripture uses the term “spirit” to refer to the gifts, graces, and effects of the Holy Spirit rather than the Holy Spirit Himself. But the personal and divine properties repeatedly ascribed to the Spirit in Scripture clearly show that the Spirit is a Person, not merely the operation of divine power.⁴⁰

From such Scriptures and arguments Owen confidently asserted that “it is undeniably evident that he is a divine, self-sufficient, self-subsisting person, together with the Father and the Son equally participant of the divine nature.”⁴¹

³⁷ Owen, *Works*, 2:398–99.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:400. Owen quoted Gen. 1:2; Ps. 33:6; Job 26:13; 33:4; Ps. 104:30; Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:16; 5:3–4; 28:25–26; 1 Cor. 3:16; 12:6, 11; 2 Cor. 13:14; Acts 20:28; Matt. 12:31; Ps. 139:7; John 14:29; Luke 12:12; Acts 13:2, 4; 2 Pet. 1:21.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:401–403. See also 3:72–92.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:69.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12:89.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Unity and Relations in the Godhead

While Owen was cautious about speculation in theology, he affirmed the value, indeed the necessity, of using extra-biblical language to explain biblical doctrine. If the church cannot express biblical truth in its own words, then it cannot interpret or apply Scripture, which is to make the Bible useless.⁴² Thus, terms like Trinity, essence, and generation have their rightful place in the language of faith.

The Unity of the Divine Essence

The Trinitarian tradition has always been careful to avoid tritheism, but to stand with the *Shema* that the Lord is one (Deut. 6:4). The Athanasian Creed affirmed,

That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father: another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is: such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost ... uncreated ... infinite ... eternal ... Almighty ... God. And yet they are not three Gods: but one God.⁴³

Similarly, Owen taught that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one (John 10:30; 1 John 5:7), having one name (Matt. 28:19).⁴⁴ Owen then used the words “essence” and “nature” to describe this unity, grounding these terms in the Bible:

Now this oneness can respect nothing but the nature, being, substance, or essence of God.... There is mention in the Scripture of the Godhead of God, Rom. 1:20, “His eternal power and Godhead;” and of his nature, by excluding them from being objects of worship who are not God by nature, Gal. 4:8. Now this natural Godhead of God is his substance or essence, with all the holy, divine excellencies which naturally and necessarily appertain thereunto. Such are eternity, immensity, omnipotency, life, infinite holiness, goodness, and the like. This ... is the nature, essence, or substance of the Father, Son, and Spirit; one and the same

⁴² Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen*, 98–99. He cites Owen, *Works*, 2:378–79.

⁴³ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:66–67. The Athanasian Creed is a document of uncertain origin and owes less to Athanasius than to Augustine. It gained great authority in the Western church during the Middle Ages, being recited in daily devotions. It was affirmed by Lutherans and Reformed alike, though without its sentences of damnation. *Ibid.*, 2:36.

⁴⁴ Owen, *Works*, 2:405.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

absolutely in and unto each of them: for none can be God, as they are revealed to be, but by virtue of this divine nature or being. Herein consists the unity of the Godhead.⁴⁵

Owen was careful not to define a “person” as an individual essence or substance, so as to avoid the implication of three essences or three substances, and thus three Gods.⁴⁶ Instead, he used the terms “subsistence” or “hypostasis” for person, employing the phrases “intelligent, voluntary agent,” “person,” and “intelligent subsistence” interchangeably. The three are “distinct, living, divine, intelligent, voluntary principles of operation or working, and that in and by internal acts one towards another, and in acts that outwardly respect the creation.” He wrote, “[A] divine person is nothing but the divine essence, upon the account of an especial property, subsisting in an especial manner.”⁴⁷ Thus there is one essence subsisting in three Persons.

Anti-Trinitarians objected that this doctrine of three-and-one is contrary to reason. Owen responded that it is not contrary to “reason absolutely,” but to “weak, maimed, and imperfect” reason as it resides in foolish men. He therefore answered their logical objections by showing that the doctrine is not formally contradictory. The Trinity is three in Persons but one in infinite Substance—not one and three in the same respect. Nevertheless, he reminded his readers that it is absurd that the “finite can perfectly comprehend that which is infinite.” It is “the highest reason in things of pure revelation to captivate our understandings to the authority of the Revealer.”⁴⁸

In the midst of polemics against the Socinians, Owen did not lose sight of the truly personal oneness of God. The unity of the divine Persons is both ontological and relational, for “God is love” (1 John 4:8). It is therefore a unity of essential love. Owen wrote, “The person of Christ is the principal object of the love of God,” explaining,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2:407. Owen made passing references to “the mutual in-being” of the Father and the Son (John 10:38; 14:10), called by the Greeks *emperichoresis*, and by others “mutual circumincession,” the latter of which Owen considered a “barbarous term.” *Works*, 2:408, 12:73.

⁴⁶ The medieval and Reformed theologians struggled to simultaneously receive and correct Boethius’s classic definition of a person as “an individual substance of a rational nature,” in light of the ambiguity of meaning in “substance,” sometimes used by the fathers for “essence” and sometimes for “hypostasis.” Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:34, 47, 177–82.

⁴⁷ Owen, *Works*, 2:399, 405, 407. Cf. *Works*, 1:472.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 2:409–12. Cf. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, 48–49.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

No small part of the eternal blessedness of the holy God consisteth in the mutual love of the Father and the Son, by the Spirit. As he is the only begotten of the Father, he is the first, necessary, adequate, complete object of the whole love of the Father.... In him was the ineffable, eternal, unchangeable delight and complacency of the Father, as the full object of his love.... His being the only-begotten Son declares his eternal relation unto the person of the Father, of whom he was begotten in the entire communication of the whole divine nature. Hereon he is in the bosom of the Father—in the eternal embraces of his love, as his only-begotten Son. The Father loves, and cannot but love, his own nature and essential image in him.⁴⁹

The Generation of the Son from the Father

Owen was cautious in his exegesis of Scripture, even in matters he was eager to affirm. For example, he hesitated to follow the fathers in their interpretation of Hebrews 1:3 (the Son “is the brightness of his glory”) to affirm that Christ is “God of God, and Light of Light.” Instead, he simply took it to teach that the Son “is one distinct from God the Father, related unto him, and partaker of his glory.”⁵⁰ Similarly, Owen recognized that Psalm 2:7 (“Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee”) was interpreted by many church fathers with respect to the Son’s eternal generation. But in his exposition of Hebrews 1:5, he thought it more likely that the begetting was more declarative than generative, corresponding to the exaltation of the king in Psalm 2 and Hebrews 1.⁵¹

But he did not hesitate to say that Christ had His “generation” from the Father on the basis of the Scriptural phrase, “only begotten Son” (e.g., John 3:16). Since Christ is the true, proper Son of God—in a natural sense, not a metaphorical sense—He is begotten of the substance of His Father, for that is what it means to be a true son of a father.⁵²

Owen understood “begotten” and “generation” to be “the very same things in words of diverse sound.” This generation was not by adopting grace, for He was the Son before the universe was made (Heb. 1:2). Therefore, it is an “eternal generation” whereby “the Son receives his personality, and therein his divine nature, from him who said unto him,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1:144. “So the Spirit is the mutual love of the Father and the Son.” *Works*, 3:67.

⁵⁰ John Owen, “Exposition on Hebrews Chapter 1,” *John Owen Collection* [CD-ROM], *Christian Library Series, Volume 9* (Rio: AGES Library, 2007), 103, 105.

⁵¹ Owen, “Exposition on Hebrews Chapter 1” (AGES), 157–59.

⁵² Owen, *Works*, 10:184–86.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

'Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee' [Ps. 2:7; cf. Heb. 1:5].⁵³ Owen saw this idea taught in the words of Jesus in John 5:19–23.⁵⁴

In another place, Owen explained that Christ's

distinct personality and subsistence was by an internal and eternal act of the Divine Being in the person of the Father, or eternal generation—which is essential unto the divine essence.... He was not, he is not, in that sense, the effect of the divine wisdom and power of God, but the essential wisdom and power of God himself.⁵⁵

12

Biddle objected to the idea that Christ was “the Son of God because he was eternally begotten out of the divine essence.” In his answer, Owen first corrected Biddle: “we say not that the Son is begotten eternally out of the divine essence, but in it, not by an eternal act of the Divine Being, but of the person of the Father.”⁵⁶

Owen also carefully affirmed the Son's aseity (like Calvin before him). Owen wrote, “The Father is of none, is *autautos* [of himself]. The Son is begotten of the Father, having the glory of the only-begotten Son of the Father, and so is *autotheos* [God in and of himself] in respect of his nature, essence, and being, not in respect of his personality, which he hath of the Father.”⁵⁷

The Procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son

In what sense is the Holy Spirit called the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ? Owen surveyed the semantic domains of the Hebrew *ruach* and the Greek *pneuma*, which can signify “wind,” “vanity,” “any part or quarter,” “vital breath” of a living creature, “rational soul of man,” the “affections” or mind of men, “angels,” and “the Spirit of

⁵³ We note that Owen did cite Ps. 2:7 here with respect to eternal generation. See *Works*, 1:472. It is not clear whether this reflects a change in opinion, an inconsistency, or a willingness to use that which is “declarative” to imply a deeper ontological reality. As we will see, Owen similarly believed that the procession texts refer to the economy of salvation, but also that salvation reveals the eternal Trinity.

⁵⁴ Owen, *Works*, 12:73, 213–14. On John 5:17, Owen wrote, “the Son can do nothing of himself but what the Father doth, seeing he hath his essence, and so, consequently, will and power, communicated to him by the Father.” *Ibid.*, 187.

⁵⁵ Owen, *Works*, 1:45. Cf. 1:69–72.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 12:177.

⁵⁷ Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen*, 104. He cites Owen, *Works*, 12:392.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

God."⁵⁸ Of these various meanings, the one Owen found most illuminating for the title "the Spirit of God" was the idea of

the breath of man; for as the vital breath of a man hath a continual emanation from him, and yet is never separated utterly from his person or forsaketh him, so doth the Spirit of the Father and the Son proceed from them by a continual divine emanation, still abiding one with them.⁵⁹

13

While Owen admitted that this analogy between the Spirit of God and the breath of man is very imperfect, nevertheless he found it in Scripture itself.

- Psalm 33:6, "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath [*ruach*] of his mouth."
- Psalm 18:15, "Then the channels of waters were seen, and the foundations of the world were discovered at thy rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath [*ruach*] of thy nostrils."
- John 20:22, "And when he [Jesus] had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost."⁶⁰

Therefore, Owen saw the very names of the Spirit as the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ as indicating an incomprehensible yet real procession in the divine being.

The classic Scripture text for the relation of the Spirit to the Father and the Son is John 14–16. Owen believed that Jesus gradually introduced to His disciples the procession of the Spirit from the Son over the course of the discourse.

The mystery of his sending the Spirit, our Saviour instructs his disciples in by degrees. Chap. 14:16, he saith, "I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter;" in the progress of his discourse he gets one step more upon their faith, verse 26, "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name;" but chap. 15:26, he saith, "I will send him from my Father;" and here [John 16:7], absolutely, "I will send him."⁶¹

Owen argued that these verses spoke primarily to the "economical or dispensatory proceeding of the Spirit, for the carrying on of the work of grace." The Spirit is said here

⁵⁸ Owen, *Works*, 3:47–52.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:55.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2:226.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

to proceed “to testify of Christ” in His redemptive-historical mission after Christ’s exaltation. Nevertheless, “this relation *ad extra* (as they call it) of the Spirit unto the Father and the Son, in respect of operation, proves his relation *ad intra*, in respect to personal procession.” In other words, the Spirit’s manner of working in redemption reveals His eternal relationship with the Father and the Son within the Godhead. Thus Owen could affirm on the basis of John 14:16 that “he is the Spirit of the Father and the Son, proceeding from both eternally, so receiving his substance and personality.”⁶²

The Works of the Triune God

Trueman wrote of Owen, “Time and again, he insists that all external works of God are to be understood as works of the one God, and that all such are also to be ascribed in particular and distinct ways to each of the three persons of the Trinity.”⁶³ Richard Daniels saw this emphasis as a special quality of Owen’s theology.

Owen’s doctrine of the Trinity is noteworthy for the following reasons. First, an obvious feature of Owen’s theology is his emphasis upon the fact that every work of God is a perfect work of the entire Trinity. This conviction is so strong that it might fairly be considered a regulative principle in his theological thinking, often appearing in his exposition. Yet equally obvious is the great emphasis he places upon the order of subsistence upon the persons of the ontological Trinity as providing the pattern for their operations. This is, of course, not new in theory, but Owen’s emphasis upon, and development of, the idea is rare. Conversely, since God is known only by his works, the works of the triune God are deliberately designed for the revelation of his triune nature, particularly the work of redemption.⁶⁴

Owen thus saw the external works of the Trinity as following and revealing the pattern of their eternal subsistence.

The Father is the fountain of all, as in being and existence, so in operation. The Son is of the Father, begotten of him, and therefore, as unto his work, is sent by him; but his own will is in and unto what he is sent about. The Holy Spirit proceedeth from the Father and the Son, and, therefore, is sent and given by them as to all the

⁶² Ibid., 2:227. Cf. 3:61, 116–17.

⁶³ Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, 124.

⁶⁴ Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen*, 102.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

works which he immediately effecteth; but yet his own will is the direct principle of all that he doth,—he divideth unto every one according to his own will.⁶⁵

A little later, he returned to this idea: the Father as “fountain” (Rom. 11:36), the Son as the cause of “subsisting, establishing,” giving God’s works “a consistency, a permanency” (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3), and the Spirit as the cause of “the finishing and perfecting of all these works.”⁶⁶

Nevertheless, Owen was careful to say that we cannot divide the works of God among the members of the Trinity. All the works of God are to be ascribed to “God absolutely ... because the several persons are undivided in their operations, acting all by the same will, the same wisdom, the same power.” But as there are distinctions among the divine Persons, so “there is no divine work but is distinctly assigned unto each person, and eminently unto one.” If all three Persons are always involved, in what sense can any divine work be “distinctly” assigned to one Person? Owen wrote that is so when the special property of that Person leaves a distinct impression upon that work, as the Father’s authority in creating the world, or when that Person makes a “peculiar condescension” in that work, as Christ did in His incarnation.⁶⁷

The Trinitarian Work of Creation

After describing the unity and distinctions of the works of the Trinity, Owen wrote, “Thus, the creation of the world is distinctly ascribed to the Father as his work, Acts 4:24; and to the Son as his, John 1:3; and also to the Holy Spirit, Job 33:4; but by the way of eminency to the Father, and absolutely to God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁶⁸

Therefore, the Son also participated in the work of creating the universe (John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16–17).⁶⁹ In his commentary on Hebrews 1:2b (“by whom [the Son] he also created the world”), Owen wrote in opposition to the Socinians, “In the creation of the world, the Father wrought in and by the Son, the same creating act being the act of both persons,

⁶⁵ Owen, *Works*, 3:92.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:94. Cf. 1:219 and Owen, “Exposition on Hebrews Chapter 1” (AGES), 91.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:93–94. Owen footnoted his presentation of this doctrine of unity and distinctions in the works of the Trinity with several quotations in Greek and Latin from such church fathers as Athanasius, Basil, Ambrose, and Augustine. He was clearly operating within the Christian Trinitarian tradition and demonstrating a Renaissance propensity for ancient sources in the original languages.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:93.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:393–94, 12:265–66.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

John 5:17, their will, wisdom, and power being essentially the same." A little later, he elaborated that the Father created the world by the Son, "not as an instrument, or an inferior, intermediate, created cause: for then also must he be created by himself, seeing all things that were made were made by him, John 1:3, but as God's own eternal Word, Wisdom, and Power, Proverbs 8:22–24, John 1:1." Since Hebrews 3:4 affirms that "He who made all things is God," Owen saw Hebrews 1:2 as "an illustrious testimony given to the eternal Godhead and power of the Son of God."⁷⁰ Owen found evidence that Christ's participation in the work of creation was rooted in His own deity in Hebrews 1:10, which says of Christ, "Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the work of thine hands." This text identifies Christ as Jehovah, to whom the quoted Psalm refers—the Creator of all things.⁷¹

Owen traced the work of the Holy Spirit in creation as well. The Spirit's role is always that of "the concluding, completing, perfecting acts." The Spirit made the heavens beautiful (Job 26:13) and cherished the unformed earth like a dove caring for its nest of young until it reached its maturity and beauty (Gen. 1:2 Hebrew). The Spirit is specifically credited with the creation of mankind (Job 33:4), and His work was pictured in God breathing life into the newly formed body of Adam (Gen. 2:7).⁷²

We now pass by the doctrine of providence to consider Owen's doctrine of redemption by the Triune God.

The Trinitarian Work of Redemption

In Owen's massive rebuttal against the doctrine of universal redemption, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, he taught:

The agent in, and chief author of, this great work of redemption is the whole blessed Trinity; for all the works which outwardly are of the Deity are undivided and belong equally to each person, their distinct manner of subsistence and order being observed.... In the several persons of the Trinity, the joint author of the whole work, the Scripture proposeth distinct and sundry acts or operations peculiarly assigned unto them; which, according to our weak manner of apprehension, we are to consider severally and apart....⁷³

⁷⁰ Owen, "Exposition on Hebrews Chapter 1" (AGES), 82, 86, 89. Cf. Owen, *Works*, 3:93.

⁷¹ Owen, *Works*, 12:273.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 3:75, 82, 94, 96–102.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 10:163.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Here again we see Owen's emphasis on the incomprehensibility of God, together with the Augustinian doctrine that the external works of the Trinity are indivisible. We also see that, although Owen laid great stress on the centrality of Christ's work as Mediator, he still formulated redemption as a work of the whole Trinity. Therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity lies at the heart of the gospel. J. I. Packer wrote,

Owen constantly insisted that the doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of Christian faith, and that if it falls, everything falls. The reason for this insistence was that the Christian salvation is a trinitarian salvation, in which the economic relations of the three divine Persons as they work out salvation together mirror their essential and eternal relations in the glorious life of the Godhead.⁷⁴

Yet Owen's emphasis on the Son as the only Mediator kept his theology thoroughly Christ-centered. Owen wrote, "Now, because the several actions of Father and Spirit were all exercised towards Christ, and terminated in him, as God and man, he only and his performances are to be considered as the means in this work."⁷⁵ As Richard Daniels comments, "True Trinitarian thinking, it would seem, must be Christocentric, and Christocentric thinking, Trinitarian."⁷⁶

We shall consider the work of redemption in terms of the eternal covenant of redemption, the accomplishment of redemption, and the application of redemption. Redemption began in eternity, so we shall begin there.

The Trinitarian Covenant of Redemption

"The Father loves the world, and sends his Son to die" (cf. John 3:16–17). So began Owen's analysis of the Trinitarian work of redemption. The Father's sending of His Son included "an authoritative imposition of the office of Mediator" grounded in "his eternal counsel."⁷⁷ The Father entered "into covenant and compact with his Son concerning the work to be undertaken and the issue or event thereof." This covenant includes "his promise to protect and assist him" plus His promise "of success, or a good issue out of all his sufferings, and a happy accomplishment and attainment of the end of his great

⁷⁴ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 204.

⁷⁵ Owen, *Works*, 10:179.

⁷⁶ Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen*, 5.

⁷⁷ Owen, *Works*, 10:163–64. Cf. *Works*, 2:158 and John 10:18.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

undertaking."⁷⁸ Therefore, there is strict continuity between those whom the Father chose, those whom the Son redeemed, and those who will be finally saved.

Owen believed that Scripture revealed a "counsel of peace" (Zech. 6:13) between the Father and Christ, formed in eternity between God and His personal Wisdom (Prov. 8:25–26, 30–31), a foreordination of Christ to His work (1 Pet. 1:20) and promise of the accomplishment of eternal life given to Him by the Father before time began (Titus 1:2).⁷⁹ The covenant of redemption was the root of Christ's mediatorial work in time.⁸⁰ As Carl Trueman wrote, "It is the nexus between eternity and time with respect to salvation."⁸¹

Sinclair Ferguson observed, "The fulfillment of the covenant of grace by Christ is viewed as the result of a 'transaction' in eternity between the Father and the Son which, according to Owen, was carried on by means of a covenant. This is possible because within the unity of the Trinity there is the activity of distinct persons."⁸²

The phrase "covenant of redemption" was a theological innovation of the late 1630s which Owen picked up for the first time in *The Death of Death* (1647). In fact, Owen's work advanced upon previous treatments of this subject because he gave attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in the covenant.⁸³

The Trinitarian Accomplishment of Redemption

The Father, having made a covenant with His Son before the ages, also performed "the actual solemn inauguration or solemn admission of Christ into his office" in time. Owen unpacked the Father's inauguration of the Mediator in terms of a) the angelic proclamations at Jesus' birth that He was "Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10–11); b) the sending of the Spirit visibly on Jesus at His baptism (Matt. 3:16); and c) the coronation of Jesus with glory and honor at His resurrection, ascension, and session at God's right hand. The Father also furnished His Son "with a fulness of all gifts and graces" to perform the office

⁷⁸ Ibid., 10:168–71. Owen cited several Scriptures, such as Isa. 49:6–12, 53:10–12, as evidence of this eternal promise of the Father to the Son.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 6:487.

⁸⁰ Owen explores this concept of an eternal intra-Trinitarian covenant in depth in his introductory essay to the exposition of Hebrews, "Exercitations Concerning the Sacerdotal Office of Christ" (AGES), 66–111.

⁸¹ Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, 87.

⁸² Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 25.

⁸³ Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, 8–82, 86.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

of Mediator—not the fullness of the divine nature belonging to the Son by His eternal generation, but “a fulness of grace [cf. John 1:16] ... infused into the humanity” united to His deity as one Person.⁸⁴

Of course, the Son as the Mediator was directly involved in accomplishing redemption. Owen wrote, “The Son was an agent in this great work, concurring by a voluntary susception, or willing undertaking of the office imposed on him” (cf. Heb. 10:6–7; John 6:38; 4:34; 17:4). Owen analyzed the Son’s work under three headings: a) “His incarnation ... assuming not any singular person, but our human nature, in personal union with himself” (John 1:14; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 2:14). b) “His oblation, or ‘offering himself up to God for us’ ” (Heb. 9:14; Rev. 1:5; Eph. 5:25; etc.). Owen emphasized that this was “his own voluntary giving up himself” (e.g., John 10:17–18; Gal. 2:20). Owen included under Christ’s “oblation” all of His incarnate humiliation, not just His crucifixion. c) “His intercession for all and every one for those whom he gave himself for an oblation” (Ps. 2:8; Heb. 9:11–12; 1 John 2:1–2; John 17).⁸⁵

The Trinity of God gives the work of Christ its necessary foundation. Without a divine Father, there would be no one to send the Son, nor to lay sin upon Him (John 3:16; Isa. 53:6). Without a divine Son, there would be no one sufficient to satisfy divine justice for sin’s infinite debt. Without distinct divine Persons, God could not offer a sacrifice to God, nor could He make the eternal covenant with God, apart from which covenant the death of Christ has no meaning.⁸⁶

Owen also wrote of the crucial role of the Holy Spirit in redemption—not just the application of redemption but its accomplishment. Again this revolves around the person and work of the Mediator.⁸⁷ Owen wrote that the Spirit participated in: a) “The incarnation of the Son” (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:35) and in assisting Jesus “so he was filled with the Spirit” throughout His earthly career. b) “In his oblation” (Heb. 9:14), where Owen likened the Spirit to “the eternal fire under this sacrifice, which made it acceptable to God.” c) “In his resurrection” (Rom. 8:11).⁸⁸ From beginning to end, the work of the Mediator depended on the work of the third Person of the Trinity.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Owen, *Works*, 10:165–68.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 10:174–77.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 5:47–48; 10:171–73, 5:164; 12:431–32. Cf. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, 77, 88–90.

⁸⁷ Carl Trueman, “John Owen as a Theologian,” *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, ed. Robert W. Oliver (Phillipsburg, Pa.: P & R Publishing, 2002), 60.

⁸⁸ Owen, *Works*, 10:178–79.

⁸⁹ Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, 93–98.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Trinitarian Application of Redemption

Owen observed “a distinct communication of grace from the several persons of the Deity.” This he summarized as follows:

1. “The Father communicates all grace by the way of *original authority*.” He gives life and spiritual rebirth to whomever He wills (John 5:21; James 1:18). The Spirit is sent by the Father (John 14:26) and by the Son from the Father (John 16:26).
2. “The Son, by the way of making out a *purchased treasury*.” He possesses the fullness of grace in Himself at the Father’s will (John 1:16; Col. 1:19). He obtained this fullness by offering Himself for sin (Isa. 53:10–11). And He has authority to communicate this fullness of grace (John 5:25–27; Matt. 28:18).
3. “The Spirit doth it by the way of *immediate efficacy*, Rom. 8:11, ‘But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.’ ” In this text Owen saw the Father’s authority, the Son’s mediation, and the Spirit’s immediate efficacy.⁹⁰

There is a marvelous cooperation in the Trinity with respect to applying redemption. The Father gave all spiritual gifts to His Son to distribute by the Spirit. Thus the Trinity works together in a manner centering upon the Mediator. Owen wrote,

Christ received all spiritual gifts from His Father in order to bestow them on men. Christ is the great giver of all spiritual gifts, for which ministry He was “furnished” at His ascension. “For the Holy Ghost was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:39); that is, they were not poured out in the special manner spoken of in verse 38.... All spiritual gifts are bestowed by Christ, with the Holy Spirit acting, as Tertullian says, as Christ’s deputy and on His behalf, and He operates freely and as He pleases. “But all these worketh that one and selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man as he will” (1 Cor. 12:11).⁹¹

The distinct works of the Trinity in redemption are woven together in patterns set by the covenant of redemption. At the center of redemption is Christ’s purchase by His blood:

⁹⁰ Owen, *Works*, 2:16–17, emphasis original. Cf. *ibid.*, 2:228.

⁹¹ John Owen, *Biblical Theology: The History of Theology from Adam to Christ*, trans. Stephen P. Westcott (Orlando: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994), 637–38. We see again Owen’s rootedness in the fathers.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Christ “both satisfied for sin and procured the promise.” But the ultimate source of redemption is the Father: “the eternal love of the Father is not the fruit but the fountain of his purchase.” Christ, then, having done the work given Him by the loving Father, obtains the fruits of it from the Father by His intercession in heaven. “Now the Spirit, as unto us a Spirit of grace, holiness, and consolation, is of the purchase of Christ ... the Spirit, that is a fruit” of Christ’s purchase.⁹² The Spirit now comes to the elect through Christ because “[t]he Father actually invests him [Christ] with all the grace whereof, by compact and agreement, he hath made a purchase,” including “the promise of the Spirit.” Yet all three Persons participate with full freedom of will.⁹³

The involvement of the whole Trinity is evident in each step of applying redemption. For example:

- Effectual calling is an act of the Father binding people to Christ by the Spirit.⁹⁴
- Forgiveness comes from the merciful heart of the Father, through the propitiation of Christ, in the application of the promises to the soul by the Holy Spirit.⁹⁵
- Sanctification flows from the crucified Christ by the Spirit, who is the efficient cause of the mortification of sin and the vivifying grace.⁹⁶
- Perseverance is guaranteed by the Spirit, whom Christ purchased and obtains by His intercession with the Father according to their covenant in order to spiritually bond believers to Christ forever.⁹⁷

The application of redemption takes place through divine revelation. So we turn now from the work of redemption to the work of revelation.

The Trinitarian Work of Revelation

Sebastian Rehnman observes that Owen has a “Trinitarian concept of revelation.” He notes, “This revelation Owen conceives of according to a Trinitarian pattern, in which

⁹² Owen, *Works*, 2:198.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 2:202, 234–35.

⁹⁴ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 33.

⁹⁵ Owen, *Works*, 6:381, 384, 407.

⁹⁶ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 58, 73, 147. Owen, *Works*, 3:393, 6:19.

⁹⁷ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 266–67.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Christ revealed the Father at sundry times and in divers manners through the Holy Spirit working in the prophets and apostles."⁹⁸

Christ the Mediator is central to all evangelical theology. Christ was fully qualified to be the Revealer of God because of His oneness with the Father in the divine essence. Owen wrote, "The Logos itself, the eternal Word of God, had always an infinite knowledge of all things, allied to a perfect concurrence in the Divine will."⁹⁹ Owen quoted John 1:18: "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." Then he commented,

[These words of Scripture] declare Christ to be of the same essence as the Father, having the same divine being, and having all of the infinitely perfect attributes and comprehensions of truth which are latent in the Godhead. Therefore, he alone is equipped to expound God perfectly. He alone has seen God. He alone dwelt in the bosom of the Father. He shared all of his thoughts and mysterious secrets, and he was now to carry out the foreordained proclamation of the Divine will for the accomplishment of which he was endowed with the Holy Spirit, and that "not by measure" (John 3:34). God declared that the Spirit was upon Christ without limit, as it were an unfathomable ocean of spiritual power, especially with regard to wisdom regarding the worship and knowledge of God (Isaiah 2:3); so that in him were "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3).¹⁰⁰

Christ has an infinite and direct knowledge of God in His divine nature. But infinite knowledge cannot be communicated to His finite, albeit sinless, human nature. In His humanity, Christ depended on divine revelation to know God and His will in order to perform the work of the Mediator (cf. Rev. 1:1).¹⁰¹ Here again we encounter the theological distinction between God's "archetypal theology" and revealed "ectypal theology." Christ's human nature was positioned to receive an ectypal theology of union (*theologia unionis*) by the union of the divine and human natures in the one Person of the Son. Rehnman writes, "As Christ is the Mediator between God and man, and the means of redemptive revelation, *theologia unionis* is the basis for all human theology." And this theology of the Mediator flows to Jesus in the Spirit (John 3:34).¹⁰²

The role of the Spirit in the Trinitarian work of revelation extends beyond the incarnate Person of Christ to the church. Owen wrote, "This revelation of God's will, gifted to

⁹⁸ Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 94, 67.

⁹⁹ Owen, *Biblical Theology*, 591, 593, 600 [VI.i, ii].

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 601 [VI.ii].

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 600 [VI.ii].

¹⁰² Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 59–61, 66–67. Cf. *ibid.*, 15–16, 18 [I.iii].

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Christ by the Father, communicated by Christ through the Holy Spirit to the Apostles and others for the benefit of the entire Church [i.e. in the Scriptures], taken at its greatest extent, is the divine teaching or theology of the gospel."¹⁰³ As a result, the divine authority of the Scriptures has a Trinitarian form. The Bible has absolute authority because of "the character of God," the work of Christ as "an infallible Prophet," and the testimony of the Spirit "by the word, in it, and through it."¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, human reception of this theology depends on the Holy Spirit. Owen quoted John 3:3, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," and wrote, "no one is reborn except through the power of the Holy Spirit ... the Holy Spirit alone can introduce anyone into a saving understanding of theology."¹⁰⁵

Therefore we see that for Owen the Trinity was not only involved in the planning and accomplishment of redemption, but also in the work of revealing of God's will to men. This leads us to consider the human experience of the Trinity.

The Experience of the Triune God

Carl Trueman writes, "Owen demonstrates that most delightful aspect of precritical theology: its essentially ecclesiastical and practical purpose ... it was theology done within the church for the benefit of the church." Trueman observes that this was especially true of this doctrine, for "the Trinity stood at the heart of Christian soteriology and thus must stand at the heart of Christian worship as well."¹⁰⁶ God had revealed Himself as the Trinity so that men might walk with Him in obedience, love, fear, and happiness as He required of them.¹⁰⁷ Whereas the Remonstrants viewed the Trinity as a doctrine neither fundamental nor profitable,¹⁰⁸ Owen saw it as both fundamental to saving faith and very profitable for the spiritual experience of believers. Owen viewed Christian experience as communion with the mysterious God, and so his theology was, in Letham's words, "a superb example of a synthesis of metatheoretical constructs,

¹⁰³ Owen, *Biblical Theology*, 602 [VI.ii].

¹⁰⁴ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 188, 195.

¹⁰⁵ Owen, *Biblical Theology*, 603 [VI.ii]. Owen cited John 16:13; 1 John 2:20; 1 Cor. 2:10–16; 2 Cor. 4:6. See also *ibid.*, 605–606 [VI.iii], where Owen repeatedly emphasizes the need for "the aid of the Holy Spirit."

¹⁰⁶ Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, 128, 123.

¹⁰⁷ Owen, *Works*, 2:378, 406.

¹⁰⁸ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:154–55.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

catholic exegesis and dogma, and practical pastoral piety.”¹⁰⁹ It is likely that Owen influenced the Savoy Declaration (1658) where it added to the Westminster Confession this statement, “Which Doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our Communion with God, and comfortable Dependence on him.”¹¹⁰

Ferguson wrote that in Owen’s theology “[t]he Christian life is nothing less than fellowship with God the Trinity, leading to the full assurance of faith.”¹¹¹ What did Owen mean by communion or fellowship with God? It is the mutual enjoyment shared by God and His people based on the bond between them in Christ. Owen wrote:

Now, communion is the mutual communication of such good things as wherein the persons holding that communion are delighted, bottomed upon some union between them.... Our communion, then, with God consisteth in his communication of himself to us, with our return unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him.¹¹²

Owen picked up on a theme found in Augustine though perhaps neglected in later Augustinian theologians: communion with the triune God. In the work of Augustine called “On Christian Doctrine,” one chapter is titled, “The Trinity the true object of enjoyment.” There Augustine wrote, “The true objects of enjoyment, then, are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, who are at the same time the Trinity, one Being, supreme above all, and common to all who enjoy Him.”¹¹³

Owen embraced this idea of enjoying the Trinity, and amplified it through the concept of distinct communion with each divine Person.¹¹⁴ J. I. Packer explained, “Communion with God is a relationship in which Christians receive love from, and respond in love to, all

¹⁰⁹ Letham, “John Owen’s Doctrine of the Trinity in Its Catholic Context and Its Significance for Today,” 7.

¹¹⁰ Kelly M. Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 156.

¹¹¹ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 74.

¹¹² Owen, *Works*, 2:8.

¹¹³ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, book 1, chapter 5, accessed 2–18–09 at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/doctrine.iv.ii.html>.

¹¹⁴ Owen, *Works*, 2:9. Owen carefully guarded the unity of the Godhead by clarifying that distinct communion is not exclusive communion with any one Person, but communion primarily appropriated by that Person according to His distinct property and role. *Works*, 2:18–19.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

three Persons of the Trinity.”¹¹⁵ In this regard Owen avoided the problematic tendency of Christians especially in the West to stress the “undifferentiated Godhead” while relatively neglecting relationships with the Persons of the Trinity.¹¹⁶

Communion with the Father

The saints have particular communion with the Father in “his love—free, undeserved, and eternal love” (1 John 4:8–9; 2 Cor. 13:14; John 16:26–27; Rom. 5:6).¹¹⁷ The Father’s love is “the fountain from whence all other sweetnesses flow,” the source of all grace. His love is bountiful, eternal, free, unchangeable, distinguishing, and fruitful in producing loveliness. The Father does not love the saints out of loneliness or need, but out of His abundant all-sufficiency and joy in His Son.¹¹⁸

The Father’s love calls for a response in believers “to complete communion with the Father in love” by receiving His love and making “suitable returns unto him.” They receive it “by faith.” Here Owen carefully qualifies his statement so as not to encourage “an immediate acting of faith upon the Father, but by the Son,” citing John 14:6. His Trinitarian theology remains Christ-centered by constantly acknowledging Christ as the only Mediator between God and man, but looking to the Son we see the Father, as we see the sun by the beams of light which shine from it. Thus believers are always to trust the Father as “benign, kind, tender, loving, and unchangeable therein ... as the Father, as the great fountain and spring of all gracious communications and fruits of love,” and to love Him with affection and peace.¹¹⁹ Such words contradict the view of some that Reformed theology is an exercise in Aristotelian logic where God’s love is marginal.¹²⁰

Communion with the Son

Owen quoted the words of Christ, “Behold I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). To sit at the table with Christ, He enjoying His graces in the saints,

¹¹⁵ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 204. Cf. Owen, *Works*, 2:10–16.

¹¹⁶ Kopic, *Communion with God*, 148.

¹¹⁷ Owen, *Works*, 2:19.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:21–22, 2:28, 32–33.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:22–24. The sun and the fountain are rare examples of patristic Trinitarian metaphors in Owen’s writings. Cf. Kopic, *Communion with God*, 169–70.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

and the saints feasting on Christ's glory—this for Owen was the height of spiritual delight, worthy of the most intimate poetic expressions of the Song of Songs.¹²¹

How do the saints enjoy communion with Christ? Owen again referred to 2 Corinthians 13:14: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all." Whereas believers commune with the Father in love, they commune with the Son in "grace," specifically,

- "personal grace," focusing on the Person of Christ, and,
- "purchased grace," focusing on the work of Christ as Mediator.¹²²

By "personal grace," Owen did not mean Christ's deity considered abstractly, nor the physical appearance of His human body, but the spiritual beauty of the God-man as our grace-filled Mediator (cf. Ps. 45:2).¹²³ He then proceeded to illustrate from Canticles Christ's incarnation and "fulness to save ... by the unction of the Spirit" (citing John 1:16, 3:34), and "his excellency to endear, from his complete suitableness to all the wants of the souls of men."¹²⁴ The saints enjoy communion with Christ in His personal grace "by the way of a conjugal relation ... attended with suitable conjugal affections"—that is, as spiritual Husband and wife.¹²⁵ It begins when "Christ gives himself to the soul," and the saints "receive, embrace, and submit unto the Lord Jesus as their husband, Lord, and Savior."¹²⁶ This stirs the "affections" of mutual "delight," mutual "valuation" (esteem), Christ's "pity, or compassion," with the church's answering "chastity," and Christ's "bounty" with the church's response of "duty" or a life of holiness.¹²⁷ Owen's treatment of communion with Christ in His personal grace destroys any misconception of Reformed orthodoxy as an emotionally desiccated, hyper-intellectual endeavor.

Purchased grace for Owen is "all that righteousness and grace which Christ hath procured ... by any thing that he hath done or suffered, or by any thing he continueth to do as mediator." We have communion with Christ in His work because "there is almost nothing that Christ hath done, which is a spring of that grace whereof we speak, but we

¹²¹ Owen, *Works*, 2:40.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 2:47–48. Later in this treatise Owen referred back to the "two heads" of the grace of Christ, namely, "the grace of his person, and of his office and work." *Ibid.*, 263.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 2:48.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:51–52.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:54. Owen cited in this regard Song 2:16; Isa. 54:5; 61:10; 62:5; Hos. 2:19–20; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:56, 58.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:118. Cf. 2:118–54 for Owen's full explanation of each element of affection.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

are said to do it with him"—whether crucifixion, dying, being made alive, rising, or sitting in the heavenly places.¹²⁸ In particular, “purchased grace” consists of the three graces of a) “acceptation with God” (justification), b) “sanctification from God,” and c) “privileges with and before God” (adoption and its benefits).¹²⁹ With respect to a) acceptation with God, the saints respond by grieving over sin, rejoicing in His righteousness, and consciously exchanging the two;¹³⁰ b) in “sanctification,” the saints look to Christ as their “great Joseph,” who dispenses heaven’s food to them;¹³¹ and c) in “privilege” they enjoy the spiritual liberties of the sons of God.¹³²

Two-thirds of Owen’s treatise “Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” is taken up with distinct communion with the Son. Though all communion between God and man involves all three divine Persons, the Son is especially prominent. This fits with Owen’s understanding of the Son as the appointed Mediator in the covenant. Christ is the God-Man, and all communion with God was purchased and is mediated through Him alone.

Communion with the Holy Spirit

Owen wrote, “The foundation of all our communion with the Holy Ghost [consists] in his mission, or sending to be our comforter, by Jesus Christ.” Owen understood the title *parakletos* in John 16:7 to mean “comforter” in answer to the disciples’ sorrow over Christ’s imminent departure (John 16:6). Though the elect receive regeneration passively like dry bones (Ezek. 37:1–14), believers actively trust the promises about comfort of the Spirit and pray for His work (Gal. 3:2, 14; John 7:37–39; Luke 11:13).¹³³

Owen catalogued the effects of the Comforter within believers, showing repeatedly that the Spirit teaches believers about the love and grace of God towards them.¹³⁴ These works of the Holy Spirit produce consolation, peace, joy, and hope in believers.¹³⁵ Owen rejected

¹²⁸ Ibid., 2:154–55. He cited Rom. 6:4; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:5–6; Col. 2:12–13; 3:1, 3; 2 Tim. 2:11.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 2:169.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 2:173–75, 187–94.

¹³¹ Ibid., 2:197–203, 206.

¹³² Ibid., 2:207–15. Cf. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 89–90, 97.

¹³³ Ibid., 2:222, 224, 225, 23–32.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 2:236–39. He cited Zech. 12:10; John 14:26–27; 16:14–15; Rom. 5:5; 8:15–16, 26–27; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:13–14; 4:30; 2 Cor. 1:22; 1 John 2:20, 27.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 2:250–53. He cited Acts 9:31; Rom. 14:17; 15:13; Gal. 5:22; 1 Thess. 1:6.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

both the rationalists who dismissed the work of the Spirit and the fanatics whose “spirit” disregarded the Word and Christ.¹³⁶

The Spirit centers His work on the Father and the Son. Owen wrote,

All the consolations of the Holy Ghost consist in his acquainting us with, and communicating unto us, the love of the Father and the grace of the Son; nor is there any thing in the one or the other but he makes it a matter of consolation to us: so that, indeed, we have our communion with the Father in his love, and the Son in his grace, by the operation of the Holy Ghost.¹³⁷

Although Owen does not explicitly say so, this seems to take up the third element of the Scripture he quoted regarding communion with the Father and with the Son: 2 Corinthians 13:14, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Whereas we have communion with the Father in His “love” and with the Son in His “grace,” communion with the Spirit is simply called “communion,” for in the Spirit believers commune with the Father and the Son. Thus the Spirit enables prayer to the Father by His covenant with the Son.¹³⁸

Owen presented three general ways the human soul should respond to the Spirit. He should not “grieve” the Spirit’s Person (Eph. 4:30; Isa. 63:10), but instead “pursue universal holiness” to please Him. Neither should he “quench” the Spirit’s gracious operations in his soul (1 Thess. 5:19), but rather be “careful and watchful to improve them all to the end aimed at.” Finally, he should not “resist” (Acts 7:51) the Spirit’s “great ordinance of the word,” but instead humbly subject himself to the gospel ministry of the church—that is, “fall low before the word.”¹³⁹ In this way, the believer offers a depth of submission to the Holy Spirit which can only be called worship.

Owen called believers to “ask [for the Spirit] daily of the Father in the name of Jesus Christ ... as children do of their parents daily bread” (cf. Luke 11:11–13). He continued,

And as, in this asking and receiving of the Holy Ghost, we have communion with the Father in his love, whence he is sent; and with the Son in his grace, whereby he is obtained for us; so with himself, on the account of his voluntary

¹³⁶ Ibid., 2:254–58.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 2:262.

¹³⁸ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 228.

¹³⁹ Owen, *Works*, 2:264–68.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

condescension to this dispensation. Every request for the Holy Ghost implies our closing with all these. O the riches of the grace of God!¹⁴⁰

Conclusion: The Sweet Mystery of the Trinity

Owen well appreciated that the theology of the Trinity is a mystery. The subtitle of *Vindicae Evangelicae*, his rebuttal against Socinianism, began, “The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated.” In it he wrote of “this great, tremendous mystery of the blessed Trinity.”¹⁴¹ Yet it is not a mystery to be buried in ancient creeds and long forgotten.

The Trinity is a mystery which shapes all saving faith and doctrine. Richard Muller wrote, “[I]f there is a single central dogma in the Reformed system, not in the sense of a deductive principle, but in the sense of a foundational premise for the right understanding of all other doctrine, the Trinity is most surely that central doctrine.”¹⁴²

The Trinity is therefore a mystery to be savored—a sweet mystery. Owen wrote, “What am I the better if I can dispute that Christ is God, but have no sense or sweetness in my heart from hence that he is a God in covenant with my soul?”¹⁴³

Furthermore, the experience of God as the Trinity confirms and strengthens faith in the doctrine of the Trinity. Owen wrote,

And this is the nature of all gospel truths—, they are fitted and suited to be experienced by a believing soul. There is nothing so sublime and high ... but that a gracious soul hath an experience of an excellency, reality, power, and efficacy in it all.... What is so high, glorious, and mysterious as the doctrine of the ever-blessed Trinity? Some wise men have thought meet to keep it veiled from ordinary Christians, and some have delivered it in such terms as that they can understand nothing by them. But take a believer who hath tasted how gracious the Lord is, in the eternal love of the Father, the great undertaking of the Son in the work of mediation and redemption, with the almighty work of the Spirit creating grace and comfort in the soul; and hath had an experience of the love, holiness, and power of God in them all; and he will with more firm confidence adhere to this mysterious truth, being led into it and confirmed in it by some few plain

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 2:272.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 12:73.

¹⁴² Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:156.

¹⁴³ Owen, *Works*, 12:52.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

testimonies of the word, than a thousand disputers shall do who only have a notion of it in their minds.¹⁴⁴

Therefore the Trinity is indeed a sweet mystery, a mystery instructive to the church, delightful in personal devotion, and regulative of public worship. As Owen said,

There was no more glorious mystery brought to light in and by Jesus Christ than that of the holy Trinity, or the subsistence of the three persons in the unity of the same divine nature.... And this revelation is made unto us, not that our minds might be possessed with the notions of it, but that we may know aright how to place our trust in him, how to obey him and live unto him, how to obtain and exercise communion with him, until we come to the enjoyment of him.¹⁴⁵¹

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 6:459.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 3:158.

¹ Smalley, P. (2011). "A Sweet Mystery: John Owen on the Trinity". *Puritan Reformed Journal Volume 3*, 3(1), 81–112.