

*Why did the Savoy Declaration Emend the Westminster Confession at 13:10?
Union with Christ and Effectual Calling in Late Seventeenth Century Discussion*

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Steven James Weibley, Associate Pastor, Carlisle Congregational Church
darknessintolight@gmail.com

John 2:24-3:20 is a passage addressed by John Owen, by Elisha Coles, and almost every Reformed writer who has defended the doctrines of grace in his day.

Verse 24 has often been a difficult text. Most recently Gerald Borchert has suggested that the best translation might be “Jesus did not believe their believing.”¹ As John takes pains to show, Jesus knows what is in the heart of a person, yet Jesus entrusts himself to Nicodemus with an explanation of the initial and necessary work of the Spirit in the heart. Not only is this work necessary, verse 5, for *entering* the kingdom of God, but it is necessary, verse 3, even to *see* the kingdom of God. Nicodemus *could have* understood it as it is laid out in the scriptures he taught, but he *should have* understood it certainly from a teacher he believes, on the basis of the signs he has seen, to have come from God. But the Pharisees as a group, though they have seen the signs, do not see the kingdom. Jesus tells him that the knowledge of the kingdom must come from someone who is actually from there. The one who has descended and who must be lifted up that any who look to him may be saved is the one who must reveal salvation to us. We see from the rest of this gospel, that the living out of the work God has done in Nicodemus, his sanctification, demonstrates that he has indeed received the effectual call, through the Spirit and the word of God.

What led me down the path of this paper was the unaccountable and unexplained difference between chapter thirteen, section one of the Westminster Confession and the same section in the Savoy Declaration:

Westminster (1647)	Savoy (1659)
They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more	<i>They that are united to Christ,</i> effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, are also further sanctified really and personally through the same virtue, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin

¹ John 2:23-25 in “John,” Gerald L. Borchert. New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996.

<p>weakened and mortified, and they more and more quickened and strengthened, in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.</p>	<p>is destroyed and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened, and mortified, and they more and more quickened, and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of all true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.</p>
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Why make this small change? The Minutes from Westminster chronicle the desire of those divines to seek a compromise that would allow for the clearest statement of faith, yet allow those who were genuine believers in good conscience to be able to commit to the document. In a discussion upon the decrees that indicates the diversity of views held by the divines, Gillespie demonstrates the desire to compromise where appropriate when he says “When that word is left out, is it not a truth, and so everyone may enjoy his own sense?”² Detractors of Savoy have often pointed to the ways that Savoy goes beyond Westminster in specificity, so much that they are glad its use quickly declined in England.³ Because no minutes remain from Savoy, we have no immediate evidence to suggest a reason for the difference. The Second London Baptist Confession of 1677/89 retains Savoy’s wording.⁴ It isn’t until the 1679/80 Reforming Synod in Boston that we see some discussion of this section of Savoy. At the time of the Cambridge Platform in 1648, Westminster had been recommended, “in substance,” for a confession of faith. Now Increase Mather, more and more concerned about a series of hard providences in New England which he saw as evidences of God’s judgment on declension on the part of His people, hoped a new confession of faith would bring with it revival. It was determined, after prayer and fasting on the first day, to adopt Savoy (Mather had been in England as it was being written) with some sections relating to church discipline (which were changed to be general enough to allow for Solomon Stoddard’s views, so eager appears the Boston Synod to avoid disunity)⁵. In the preface, however, the

² *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly of Divines from Transcripts of the Originals*. Ed. Alex. F. Mitchell and John Struthers. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1874, 151. The minutes are filled with fascinating accounts of the work of the divines to reach compromises, yet fence off the growing Arminian threat of the time. Several of the assembly, including the first interlocutor, William Twisse, believed in universal redemption, though not in the Arminian sense (p. 152). I have been unable to find discussion on chapter 13.

³ Savoy is more explicit, for example, on the issue of the active obedience of Christ imputed to the believer. Notable is Peter Toon in “Westminster and Savoy Compared,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 15, page 159 where he says, “The *Declaration of Faith* contains an unbalanced presentation of the doctrines of the gospel. Perhaps this imbalance may be seen as one root of that hyper-Calvinism which infected both Congregational and Baptist churches in the early eighteenth century.” According to Toon [157], they “placed the emphasis in the wrong place,” that is, on covenantal theology and God’s sovereignty.

⁴ A.G. Matthews, *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*, p. 47. Between 1677 and 1809, this Confession was reissued six times.

⁵ Stephen Foster writes “To avoid the least show of disunity, the synod propounded no original statement of polity or doctrine and deliberately took refuge in ambiguities on any point liable to dispute. . . in its only two additional changes [to Savoy], put in an article on church membership so generous it accommodated Solomon Stoddard and a statement on the magistrates’ powers in matters of religion, so charitably worded

first mention of *vocation* occurs. Writes Mather, “We may not conceal, that the doctrine of Vocation, expressed in Chapter 10, sec. 1, and summarily repeated chap. 13, sec. 1, passed not without some debate. Yet, considering, that the term, vocation, and others, by which it is described, are capable of a larger or more strict sense and use, and that it is not intended to bind apprehension precisely in point of order or method, there hath been a general condescendency thereunto.” Cotton Mather includes in his *Magnalia Christi Americana* the final statement: “They that are effectually called and regenerated, being united to Christ, having a new heart . . .”⁶ The subtle change in word order removes the emphasis on union with Christ and restores the logical order of the *ordo salutis*. Unfortunately, Thatcher, lay observer from Boston’s South Church, who had taken notes at other sessions was not present to record the discussions that led to this change.⁷ The 1708 Saybrook Assembly would use these same words for their confession.

Ultimately the reason the writers of Savoy made this change found to be less necessary by their Congregational brethren across the sea is likely hidden from us. Examining the times and the doctrine, however, may lead to some reasonable inferences for the divergence.

Much had happened in England since 1647. New heresies seemed everywhere—the Ranters, the Quakers, the Muggletonians and others. Arminianism was on the rise, as was Socinianism. Independents were accused of being “the sink of all heresies and schisms.”⁸ In addition, the Independents had been a smaller group at Westmister who had been charged by Westminster to show what it was they believed.⁹ Now their churches were growing, their pastors were respected. The Protector himself seem inclined to the Independents: the most able received university or church positions, and Cromwell counterbalanced the Presbyterian hopes for hegemony. The speed with which the divines at Savoy resolved their statement of faith, twelve days, was a stark contrast to the way they had lengthened arguments at Westminster. (Or was it because only six were on the committee to write the confession?)¹⁰ Yet, these were also perilous times for Congregationalists. John Owen’s failure to support Oliver Cromwell in a Parliamentary thrust to have him crowned king, began the decay of what had been a time of unparalleled favor for Independents.¹¹ As soon as Cromwell’s son

it could have been written by the Baptists.”, Foster, Stephen, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570-170*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991, page 228

⁶ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*. Hartford: Silas Andrus & Son, 1853. Vol. II, page 192.

⁷ Williston Walker, *Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893, 421.

⁸ See Goodwin’s speech before Cromwell *infra*.

⁹ Daniel Neal, *The History of the Puritans*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844, Vol. 2, 180. Neal’s history was originally published in four volumes between 1732 and 1738. He had previously done a well-received history of New England.

¹⁰ The framers saw this as “a special work of the Holy Ghost, that so numerous a company of ministers and other principal brethren should so speedily and jointly give up themselves to such a whole body of truths as in there collected. Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 178.

¹¹ Dewey Wallace, *The Life and Thought of Owen to 1660: A Study of the Significance of Calvinist Theology in English Puritanism*. Princeton University. Ph.D., 1965, 221. On the growth of Independency, see Walker, *Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*., 344-346. Matthews notes that between 1650 and 1658 some thirty new congregational churches were formed in East Anglia. Matthews, *The Savoy*, 24.

Richard was named Chancellor of Oxford, he refused to renominate Owen for the vice-chancellorship he had so diligently served for five years. Then, between Oliver Cromwell's sending of the summons for Savoy and the meeting, the Protector had died. In a short time (1660-1662) at least 130 Congregational ministers would be ejected from their pulpits, ushering in 30 years of persecution. Little would remain of the Savoyan work, had it not been for the Congregationalist divines adopting it in New England.¹²

While much is lost to history¹³ (we do not even know who the first moderator was) it seems that Philip Nye, John Owen, and Thomas Goodwin were the prime movers at the Savoy, the palace already known in Cromwell's day as the meeting place for continental dissenters.¹⁴ Though some have alleged that Owen wrote the preface,¹⁵ most contemporaries refer to it as a committee document. The preface affirms what Thomas Goodwin was to say when he presented the document formally to Richard Cromwell, the new Protector:

We [desired] in the first place to clear ourselves of that scandal, which not only some persons at home, but of foreign parts have affixed upon us, viz. That Independentism (as they call it) is the sink of all heresies and schisms. We have therefore declared what hath been our constant Faith and Order, to be published to the world. And to shew our harmony with the most orthodox at home and abroad, we have expressed our assent to that Confession of Faith which is the latest and best... namely, the Articles of Religion approved and passed by both Houses of Parliament after advice had with the Assembly of Divines, to which Confession for the substance of it, we have unanimously and through the grace of Christ, without the least contradiction, assented and agreed.¹⁶

The signatories believed that they were presenting a congregational form of Westminster, carefully clarifying (in view of recent events) and presenting what the writers of Westminster might write if they were assembled in 1658; all but Owen on the committee chosen to write the confession had themselves been at Westminster. Neal writes, "Their design was not to undervalue the Westminster

¹² Seventy five years later, even Independents were using Westminster instead of Savoy. Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 178.

¹³ Matthews, *Savoy*, 9, 11. No minute book has come to light. Matthews says that we can name but a "bare thirteen of the 200 elders and messengers who are said to have been present.

¹⁴ Walker, *Creeds*, 349, notes that Callamy says Nye was central to the proceedings, which might explain his demonization by Royalists later as seen in Francis Peck, *Desiderata Curiosa*, 1779 Corrected Edition in the Houghton Library of Harvard, page 496 (originally published 1732-1735). Peck's collection of Restoration gossip and carping about the clothing styles of the Independents is an interesting study (describing their hats [they looked like chamber pots] and Owen's gaudy dress [like a young and immature scholar], p. 577). He does have some of the few letters of invitation that went out for Savoy, including one letter that refers to Cromwell's favoring of the Independents, 501. The collection is biased against the Independents as are his acidic remarks. Matthews adds the comments of Calamy that Philip Nye was "the Principal Man in the managing the Meeting . . . by the Protector's order." *Savoy*, 35.

¹⁵ In the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Alexander Gordon says that Nye signed the "preface written by John Owen." Matthews questions the lack of evidence.

¹⁶ The speech is recorded in the news-journal *Mercurius Politicus No. 438* published in October 1658.

Confession, but rather to *answer the desires of that assembly, by publishing to the world such a declaration of their faith and discipline as they had demanded.*¹⁷ The Reformed Orthodox believed themselves to be upholding the Protestant Core and were “keen to allay any suspicions [they were] introducing novelties of any sort.”¹⁸ True, the preface declares, some changes were necessary with the goal of “obviating some erroneous Opinions, that have been more broadly and boldly here of late maintained by the Asserters, than in former times; and made other additions and alterations in *method*, here and there, and some clearer Explanations, as we found occasion.” Even when addressing polity, “These opinions . . . may appear new to a great many people, because they have not been professed in the English nation; but we are able to trace the footsteps of an Independent Congregational way in the ancientest practice of the Church, and in the writings of the soundest Protestant divines.”¹⁹ As Trueman concludes, “the [Reformed] consensus was itself under strain, exegetically, theologically, and socially, in the seventeenth century, and . . . it was necessary for doctrinal formulation of the doctrine [of evangelical righteousness] to undergo careful elaboration in order to respond to such.”²⁰

Seventeenth Century Views of the Effectual Call

Louis Berkhof relates for later Reformed readers what is quickly discovered upon reading the seventeenth century Reformers: the effectual call is often identified with regeneration.²¹ Chapter 10 of both Westminster and Savoy is one example. Paul (who uses the term “regeneration” only once) seems in Romans 8:30 to be conflating the two. Berkhof believes this broader title for the initial work of the Spirit was used in Post-Reformation times to “stress the close connection between the Word of God and the operation of His grace.”²² Further, our own experience of these logically separate events is as a single event, simultaneously

¹⁷ Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 179.

¹⁸ Carl R. Trueman. *John Owen; Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007, 21.

¹⁹ This is Neal’s apparent slight paraphrase of chapter 50 of the Preface to Savoy, Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 179. Neal has a different source than that of Walker, *Creeds*, having “novelties” for “new” and “Churches” for Neal’s “Church,” though likely the meaning is the same, 366.

²⁰ Trueman. *Owen*, 121.

²¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1941. 470. John Piper is not characteristic of modern theologians and seems to almost go a step further than the Puritans when he writes, “Calling/faith/justification are parts of one event that bring us from God’s enmity to his acceptance. There is a logical sequence, but to say that justification only comes *after* we are “in” would misrepresent Paul’s treatment of justification as essential to the act of actually putting us right with God.” John Piper. *The Future of Justification*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007. 98. John Frame refers to effectual calling as the first event by which God changes us when we “were living in unbelief.” Regeneration is the second event of the *ordo salutis*, first of the blessings that flow from the summons of the effectual call, and distinguishes it as the “first item on the list that occurs inside of us.” John Frame. *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: an Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2006, 184 and 185.

²² Berkhof, 471.

occurring.²³ This effectual call is not the same as the “*general* call that goes out from a pulpit or radio program and summons everyone to faith. Rather it is the *effectual* call that accomplishes what it commands.”²⁴ It is more than a preaching of the Word, though that Word is instrumental to it as John Owen writes in his Greater Catechism of 1645:

The free, gracious act of Almighty God, whereby in Jesus Christ he calleth and translateth us from the state of nature, sin, wrath, and corruption, into the state of grace and union with Christ, by the mighty, effectual working of his preaching of the Word.²⁵

In 1560, the Scottish Confession had summarized the Scriptural verdict on the state of humankind (note my italics):

This our faith, and the assurance of the same, proceeds not from flesh and blood, that is to say, from no natural powers within us, but is the inspiration of the Holy Ghost: whom we confess God, equal with the Father and with the Son; who sanctifies us, and brings us in all verity by his own operation; without whom we should remain for ever enemies to God, and ignorant of his Son, Christ Jesus. *For of nature we are so dead, so blind and so perverse, that neither can we feel when we are pricked, see the light when it shines, nor assent to the will of God when it is revealed, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus quicken that which is dead, remove the darkness from our minds, and bow our stubborn hearts to the obedience of his blessed will.* And so, as we confess that God the Father created us when we were not; as his Son, our Lord Jesus redeemed us when we were enemies to him; so also do we confess that the Holy Ghost does sanctify and regenerate us, without all respect of any merit proceeding from us, be it before or be it after our regeneration.²⁶

Later, in 1619, the Canons of Dort had summarized the condition of mankind and the quickening work required:

. . . this grace of regeneration does not treat men as senseless stocks and blocks, nor take away their will and

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ John Piper. *The Future of Justification*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007. 95.

²⁵ *The Works of John Owen*. Rio, WI: Ages Software, 2000, Vol. 1, 621. Quotes from Owen, when not imbedded in another source will be found here and with this pagination.

²⁶ Scottish Confession, chapter 12, *Faith in the Holy Ghost*.

it properties, or do violence thereto; but it spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully bends it, that where carnal rebellion and resistance formerly prevailed, a ready and sincere spiritual obedience begins to reign; in which the true and spiritual restoration and freedom of our will consist. Wherefore, unless the admirable Author of every good work so deal with us, man can have no hope of being able to rise from his fall by his own free will, by which, in a state of innocence, he plunged himself into ruin.

The most direct influence upon John Owen may have been William Ames' *The Marrow of Theology*, the best known exposition of covenant theology in English²⁷, published in Latin in 1629. Ames had studied under William Perkins and was known as "the learned Dr. Ames." He is among the handful of people cited most often by John Owen, who also had a copy of the Latin edition of 1641 in his library.²⁸ William Ames saw calling as that by which union with Christ is accomplished and notes that calling and election are often taken in the scriptures "in the same sense."²⁹ This calling is an application of God's election, his determination before the founding of the world, to his elect, whereby he effects union with Christ and is therefore, simultaneously made a partaker of the benefits that flow from that union.³⁰ Further, calling is also referred to as "regeneration," the beginning of a new life. (John 1.13; 3:6; 1 John 3:9; 1 Peter 1:23 and 2:2).³¹ When Christ is joined to man and man to Christ (John 6:56), "we say about this joining that we are *in Christ* 2 Cor 5:17; *We put on Christ*, Gal. 3.27; *We are dwelled in by Christ*, Eph 3.17; *the house of Christ*, Heb. 3.6; *The temple of Christ*, 2 Cor. 6.16; *Espoused with Christ*, Eph. Eph. 5.13; *Branches of Christ*, John 15.5; *Members of Christ*, 1 Cor 12.12. *And the name of Christ himself is in a certain way given to us*. I Cor. 12.12.³² It is from this union with Christ that every blessing of the Christian life flows. Ames is clear to stress that this is a *passive* receiving of which we are the objects, not over which we are the

²⁷ Horton Davies. *Worship and Theology in England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996 combined edition, 312. Dykstra's introduction says, "In England, Holland, and New England nearly all those who aspired to the Puritan way read the book. No matter what their aspirations, undergraduates at Emmanuel College, Leyden, Harvard, and Yale had to read the *Marrow* in Latin as part of basic instruction in divinity. William Ames. *The Marrow of Theology*. Translated from the Latin with and introduction by John Dykstra Eusden. Cleveland: United Church Press, 1968, 1.

²⁸ Sebastian Rehnman. *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002, 21. While Reformed writers of Owen's day "certainly exercised considerable influence on him," he quotes them less often than one might expect because they were "too modern to refer to." 22. Rehnman gives a short list, including *Medulla Theologica*, the Latin title, from the 1684 auction of Owen's library, which contained three thousand books in a foot note on page 23.

²⁹ Ames. *The Marrow*, 157. He quotes 1 Cor. 1.26-28. "You see your *calling* . . . God has *chosen* foolish things . . ."

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

³² *Ibid.*

subjects.³³ What enables those who were dead to receive Christ? An inborn principle that is implanted in us “surely, unavoidably, and unchangeably.”

Owen writes extensively on this implantation of an inborn principle, which is our initial sanctification, in his 1674 *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*. Individual acts cannot make us holy (1 Corinthians 13:3; Isaiah 1:11-15). Just as practice at intellectual habits in our work results in us getting better at them, so people may develop moral habits.³⁴ But these moral habits are external to who we are and are caused by antecedent causes, they are the “fruits of other principles.” Mere legal convictions will produce them, and put men upon a course of them. Fears, afflictions, terrors of conscience, dictates of reason, improved by education and confirmed by custom, will direct, yea, compel men to their observance.³⁵ People, by practice may indeed “attain a readiness and facility in them.”³⁶ But “these few honest actions” can inoculate people against true sanctification; they “do satisfy some persons that they are as holy as they should be or as they need be.”³⁷ These outward duties, however, have no “root of grace in the heart,” so that what “rises up will quickly wither.”³⁸ The rich young ruler is an example of one who seemed so righteous, but Jesus asked exactly the question which went to what was missing in this man’s life: “all he had done . . . was not from an internal principle.”³⁹

Elisha Coles’ *A Practical Discourse of God’s Sovereignty* shows how, failing possession of this internal principle, nothing can bring gospel change. ⁴⁰ He recounts Old Testament times of blessing where the recipients were no better for it (Deuteronomy 32:15; 2 Chronicles 26:16.) God’s people had received remarkable times of blessing, but “so true is that maxim, ‘Let favor be shown to the wicked, yet will he not earn righteousness.’” (Isaiah 26:10)⁴¹ But neither will suffering do it. “The more they are stricken, the more they revolted (Amos 4:6-12).” Even the Word of God without this new habit cannot turn the heart back; Coles uses as a principal example the Jews in Jesus’ day who heard the Word, who had all the benefits, but still continued to kill the those sent by God as they had in the days of the prophets (Jeremiah 25:3-4; 37:15; Luke 20:10-15) . “Miracles will not do it” continues Coles’ refrain as he reminds his readers of the

³³ Ephesians 2.5. “[God] made us alive together with Christ.” Puritans used the word “quicken.” Note also the passive natures of all of the metaphors supra.

³⁴ Owen, *Works*, III, 577

³⁵ Owen, *Works*, III, 583

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 578.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 583.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 597.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 591.

⁴⁰ Coles lived c. 1608-1688, but little is known of him. What is remarkable is that both Thomas Goodwin and John Owen wrote prefaces for this book. John Owen, seems surprised that, “in writing this treatise he had little or no intercourse with books, but those of the holy scriptures . . . *Yet* [my italics] there are some peculiar advantages which accompany this discourse.” Goodwin, in his preface similarly notes that “though he hath not had the use and help of foreign languages [meaning here Hebrew, and Greek, and perhaps, more importantly for academic work Latin] wherein these points have been mostly written.” Goodwin notes that he has known Coles for twenty-eight years. Elisha T. Coles. *A Practical Discourse of God’s Sovereignty*. Pittsburgh: D. & M. Maclean, 1831, iii-v.

⁴¹ Coles, *Practical Discourse*, 186.

miracles done before Pharaoh that brought no lasting change. The Lord's people had seen all he had done in Egypt, to Pharaoh, the signs, the great wonders, "but to this day," says Moses, "the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear (Deuteronomy 29.4)⁴² No, says Cole, the only hope is to be born of the Spirit; it cannot come by right circumstance of birth or a human decision. "But to all who did *receive* him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, *not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.* John 1.12-13."⁴³

It is not enough, however, to merely remove hindrances; something new, something active, something powerful, something vital is needed. Owen lays out exegetically what this spiritual habit is.⁴⁴ He finds it in Deuteronomy 30:6 where the Lord circumcises our hearts that we may love Him, pointing out that this work cannot happen without an implantation of the principle, which is necessary "unto all acts of holiness" which flow from the initial implantation.⁴⁵ "This habit or principle is nothing but a transcript of the law of God implanted and abiding in our hearts, whereby we comply with an answer unto the whole will of God therein. This is holiness in the habit and principle of it.⁴⁶ The effectual call results in "a new and actual obedience" [note the recurring refrain found throughout the scriptures: "I will . . . and you shall"]:⁴⁷

And *I will* give you a new heart, and a new spirit *I will* put within you. And *I will* remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And *I will* put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Ezekiel 36.26, 27

This Nicodemus should have known from his daily study and teaching. It is the point of the words of Jesus in John 3:6. The product of the work of the Spirit in us is this new birth.

It is yet more expressly revealed and declared in the New Testament, John 3:6. There is a work of the Spirit of God upon us in our regeneration; we are "born again of the Spirit." And there is the product of this work of the Spirit of God in us, that which is born in this new birth, and that is "spirit" also. It is something existing in us, that is of a *spiritual nature and spiritual efficacy*. It is something abiding in us, acting in a continual opposition against the *flesh* or sin, as Galatians 5:17, and unto all duties of obedience

⁴² Ibid. 215

⁴³ Ibid., 186.

⁴⁴ Owen, *Works*. III, chapter 6, 580.

⁴⁵ Ibid. See also Jeremiah 31:33

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Coles has a remarkable list of these promises alongside the parallel "conditional" promises, 212-213.

unto God. And until this spirit is formed in us, — that is, our whole souls have a furnishment of spiritual power and ability, — we cannot perform any one act that is spiritually good, nor any one act of vital obedience. This spirit, or spiritual nature, which is born of the Spirit, by which alone we are enabled to live to God, is that habit of grace or principle of holiness which we intend. And so also is it called a new creature: “If any man be in Christ he is a new creature,” 2 Corinthians 5:17. It is something that, by an almighty creating act of the power of God by his Spirit, hath the nature of a living creature, produced in the souls of all that are in Christ Jesus. And as it is called the “new creature,” so it is also a “divine nature,” 2 Peter 1:4; and a new nature is the principle of all operations. And this is what we plead for: *The Spirit of God createth a new nature in us, which is the principle and next cause of all acts of the life of God.*⁴⁸

We begin to get a sense of that which Owen is so good at articulating; a sense of worship and awe that flows out of apprehending what it is God has done for us.

And, as Owen will reiterate many times in the years directly before and after Savoy, it is this implanted principle “whereby we have union with Christ.”⁴⁹ The Holy Spirit creates this union, but the goal of that union is this new principal of grace. “It is that whereby we become ‘members of his flesh and of his bones,’ (Ephesians 5:30). As Eve was with Adam,—she was one with him, because she had the same nature with him, and that derived from him, . . . so are we of him, partake of the same divine nature with him. Thus he that is ‘joined unto the Lord is one spirit (1 Corinthians 6:17);’ that is, of one and the same spiritual nature with him (Hebrews 2:11, 14).”⁵⁰ That Christ would communicate himself to us is yet another reason for Owen to see his glory. Again picking up Paul’s use of marriage as an illustration of the mystical union between Christ and his church, Owen writes in *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ (1684)*,

And that new heavenly nature which is thus formed in believers, as the first vital act of that union which is between Christ and them by the inhabitation of the same Spirit, is peculiarly his nature. For both is it so as it is in him the idea and the exemplar of it in us, — inasmuch as we are predestinated to be conformed unto his image, — and as it is wrought or produced in our souls by an emanation of power,

⁴⁸ Owen, *Works*, Vol. III, *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*. Book III, chapter 6, 581.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 582. *Communion with God* was published in 1657.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 582.

virtue, and efficiency from him. This is a most heavenly way of the communication of himself unto us, wherein of God “he is made unto us wisdom and sanctification.” Hereon he says of his church, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh;” — I see myself, my own nature, in them; whence they are comely and desirable. Hereby he makes way to “present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but holy and without blemish.” On this communication of Christ unto us, by the forming of his own nature in us, depends all the purity, the beauty, the holiness, the inward glory of the church.⁵¹

The effectual call brings this change, and therefore begins the life of sanctification: “In the *same instant* where anyone is united unto Christ, and by the *same act* whereby he is so united, he is *really and habitually purified and sanctified*; for where the Spirit of God is, there is liberty, and purity, and holiness. All the acts and duties of holiness are in order of nature consequential hereunto, but the person is quickened, purified, and sanctified in its union.”⁵²

From these few examples, randomly selected from many, we can see Owen’s growing understanding of the significance of union with Christ, as the source for all subsequent blessing.

The Controversy with Baxter Sharpens Owen’s Thinking

One other rabbit trail remains in this elusive search to understand the change of wording in Chapter 13, one that had preoccupied Owen’s writing time between the Westminster and Savoy Conferences. At Westminster, the most significant issue has been said to be Antinomianism.⁵³ Now, ten years later, new enemies had emerged: Arminianism and Socinianism, an early form of Unitarianism.⁵⁴ The Reformed Orthodox saw these as two points on the same heretical line, different only in extent. Both deny God’s exhaustive knowledge of the future and suggest that God learns things sequentially as do we.⁵⁵ Both were

⁵¹ Owen, *Works*. Book Vol. I, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*. Chapter 10, 472

⁵² Owen, *Works*, 628

⁵³ According to Robert Letham, “[Antinomianism] was a constant preoccupation; a committee was formed, petitions brought to Parliament, books burned.” Robert Letham, “John Owen’s Doctrine of the Trinity in Its Catholic Context and Its Significance for Today,” December 2006,

<http://theconventicle.blogspot.com/2007/03/robert-letham-on-john-owen-on-trinity.html>, (April 1, 2008).

⁵⁴ Letham, “Doctrine of Trinity,” 10. Letham lists the central doctrines of Socinianism: “For Socinianism the trinity is contrary to reason and Scripture. Matter is co-eternal with God, who is limited in space and has no foreknowledge of future events. Christ is human and has no pre-existence. The Holy Spirit is simply the power of God and has no distinct personal identity. The cross has only an exemplary role, while salvation comes through human obedience to Christ’s commands, Original sin is rejected. Adam was naturally mortal. There is no hell. Those not saved will be annihilated. Christianity must be consistent with reason.” 2, fn.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 63. That is, in the case of Arminianism, he looks ahead to what people will do, and acts upon that knowledge.

“manifestations of the same heretical tendency towards notions of human autonomy.”⁵⁶ More importantly for Owen, that supposed autonomy meant that human beings actually create autonomous actions to which God is subject. This radical autonomy indicates that both were “motivated by a desire to exalt human abilities and to exempt human beings from divine jurisdiction.”⁵⁷ But, Owen’s concerns were never merely theoretical, they were deeply pastoral. Both Arminians and Socinians at this time agreed with Owen on the inspiration of scripture: his arguments are always about the interpretation of scripture. Indeed the Arminian John Goodwin shared the same concerns for practical holiness, spirituality, and church Reform as did Owen. In his *Redemption Redeemed*, Goodwin discusses his support for universal redemption and opposition to the Reformed doctrine of perseverance of the saints. He sounded the same note as were devout Puritans of the day, who were afraid that the doctrine of perseverance would lead to a careless attitude toward godly living. Goodwin saw the fear of falling away as an important goad and motivation for holy living.⁵⁸ In his answer to Goodwin, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance* [1654], as in his other doctrinal works, Owen grounds his arguments in the person of God and his unchangeable nature and his therefore eternal purposes. Sanctification is infallibly linked and flows from justification,⁵⁹ just as we have seen that sanctification is infallibly linked and flows from effectual calling. Therefore, rather than destroying holiness, Reformed Orthodoxy offers the only possible security and impetus for a holy life, “stimulating love and obedience to God.”⁶⁰

While Owen saw both Arminianism and Socinianism to be clear examples of heresy, his controversy with Richard Baxter was of a different nature. Owen would often quote authors who held the same views as Baxter with “great respect and no hint of discomfort.”⁶¹ While the Arminian version of universal divine love and intention to save was held in common with Baxter’s Amyraldian scheme, Baxter did not find it necessary, as did Amyrault and his successors, to revise God’s sovereignty to make his theology work; “Amyraldian universalism did not destroy the crucial dependence of the creature upon the Creator.”⁶² Yet, an understanding of Baxter’s peculiar theology of justification is not necessary to understand Owen’s response to charges made by Baxter in two books, *Aphorisms of Justification* and *Richard Baxter’s Confession of His Faith*. As J.I. Packer, whose dissertation topic was Baxter, has written, “Baxter was a great and saintly man; as pastor, evangelist, and devotional writer, no praise for him can be too high; but as a theologian he was, though brilliant, something of a disaster.”⁶³ Baxter had already opposed the Westminster Confession on the issue of

⁵⁶ Trueman, *John Owen*, 26.

⁵⁷ Trueman, *John Owen*, 29.

⁵⁸ Henry Knapp, “Augustine and Owen on Perseverance,” *Westminster Theological Journal*. 62:1 (Spring 2000), 70.

⁵⁹ Knapp, 72.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Trueman, *Owen*, 5.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶³ J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990, 159. Baxter’s chapter 9 “The Doctrine of Justification in Development and Decline among the Puritans,” pages 156-160 is likely the best short summary of Amyraldianism.

justification (and remained opposed until his death).⁶⁴ Between Westminster and Savoy, he had come to a 1654 meeting of a sub-committee of the Grand Committee for Religion by which Oliver Cromwell was hoping to create some unity in the Commonwealth. Arriving, Baxter found “the divines practically in the hands of Dr. Owen, and his *assistants* Goodwin, Nye, and Simpson, and strongly disinclined to the broad form of concord proposed by Baxter.” Baxter said that Owen’s sectarian contentiousness was “so upon their minds that it hindered their judgment.”⁶⁵ Later, Baxter would say of Savoy, that “the Independent confessions are like such oaths as speak one thing and mean another; so much could two men [Dr. Owen and Goodwin] do with many honest, tractable young men, who had more zeal for separating strictness than judgment to understand the Word of God, the interest of the churches, and of themselves.”⁶⁶

The first salvo had been Baxter’s *Aphorisms of Justification* in response to Owen’s 1647 *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. Owen responded in 1650 with *Of the Death of Christ, the Price He Paid, and the Purchase He Made*. Owen responded to Baxter’s second book against him with a short appendix to his 1655 book-length response to the English Socinian John Biddle. Baxter had served as an army chaplain in the Civil War and what he saw there informed his writing for the rest of his life. To Baxter, the doctrine of justification held by Owen, was destroying holiness in the lives of those soldiers with whom he worked. Believing that their righteousness was that of Another and understanding that this righteousness imputed to them was perfect, reasoned Baxter, cut the nerve to any holy living; and he believed he had seen enough of the results of Owen’s theology in the chaotic lives of those in the army who held to it.⁶⁷

More importantly for the purposes of this paper (and likely because of a poorly chosen analogy in *The Death of Death*⁶⁸), Baxter charges Owen with believing in “eternal justification.” If Jesus died for every sin we have and will ever commit, then God cannot refuse this payment. The debt is either paid or not paid. And if it is paid, there can be no chronological delay in the elect person who is therefore already justified. Therefore, justification is only a realization that one is justified.⁶⁹ After expressing discouragement that Baxter, when he personally met with Owen, mentioned nothing of his concerns, Owen goes on to carefully summarize what he understood Baxter to have meant. Then point by point he begins a refutation which is summarized only in part here. He stresses that the application of what Christ accomplished does not temporally occur until the Father “infuses a principle of life into our souls, whereby radically and virtually the whole is accomplished.”⁷⁰ Owen’s covenantal theology is more fully developed here. After all of his Trinitarian writing during the period between the two

⁶⁴ Austin R. Walker “Benjamin Keach and the ‘Baxterian’ Controversy of the 1690s.” *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* (2003, 2004). *The Reformed Baptist Theological Review Volume 3:2 (2006)*, 7.

⁶⁵ William A. Shaw, *A History of the English Church During the Civil Wars and under the Commonwealth*. Vol. II, 87.

⁶⁶ Neal, *History of the Puritans, 179-180*.

⁶⁷ Trueman, *John Owen*, 106, 113.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷⁰ Owen, *Works*, Vol. 12, 769. A statement similar to Owen’s remarks on effectual calling elsewhere.

confessions, Owen now places the agreement between the persons in the trinity on center stage. “Salvation is a task which needs be undertaken by God himself if it is to be at all effective . . .”⁷¹ Therefore the agreement is made between the Father and the Son about the Son’s willingness to be mediator. The covenant is not actually made directly to the elect. Of course, Owen never wanders far from scripture citation to speculation.

First, then, I do not believe that any man is *actually justified from eternity*, because of that of the apostle, Romans 8:28-30. But yet what is the state of things in reference to the economy of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, engaged in from eternity for the salvation of sinners, with that fountain union that is between Christ and his body in their predestination . . .⁷²

Further, the elect cannot be actually “*in their own persons justified*,” and absolved at his death, because of John 3:36. The wrath of God remains on those elect until they are effectually called.

Tentative Conclusion

Considering the lack of minutes or direct comment regarding the reason for the change made to Westminster 13.1, the following inferences are offered:

1. Due to the usual intention of the Savoy writers to show agreement with Westminster wherever this is possible, the introduction of a phrase not found in the Westminster Confession proper would seem deliberate.
2. Changes in the religious climate of the day impelled the writers of Savoy to “clarify” some issues that had been raised since the writing of Westminster, but which they felt (apart from polity) was in keeping with the Westminster Confession’s implicit theology.
3. In the Westminster Confession proper there is not a specific statement regarding the believer’s union with Christ, a topic on which Owen had and would be writing at length (*though* see 65, 66, and 69 in the Larger Catechism for explicit statements on “union”).
4. The section on effectual calling in the influential *Marrow of Ames* is principally concerned with the union with Christ which it affects; this way of thinking about effectual calling was well-known to Owen and his colleagues.
5. The implanting of a vital habitual principal of holiness is essential to union with Christ, which union is the necessary and antecedent cause for every blessing which flows from His life and death for us.
6. By placing “united with Christ” first in chapter 13.1, Owen would avoid the misunderstanding (already found in the writings of Baxter, among others) that, with the more explicit reference to the imputed active and

⁷¹ Trueman, *John Owen*, 77.

⁷² Owen, *Works*, Vol. 12, 791.

passive obedience in Savoy, that he was arguing for eternal justification.

Uses

The preparation of this paper has meant months of being mentored by those who are now part of the Church Victorious and months of reflecting on the significance of the doctrine of effectual calling as an impetus to sanctification. Especially significant to the author have been the following “unearthed” passages, offered for the reader’s reflection.

The Father’s Plan

“Desire of union and enjoyment is the first vital act of love. The soul, upon the discover of the excellencies of God, earnestly desires to be united unto them—to be brought near unto that enjoyment of them whereof it is capable, and wherein alone it can find rest and satisfaction. This is essential to all love; it unites the mind unto its object, and rests not but in enjoyment. God’s love unto us ariseth out of the overflowing of his own immense goodness, whereof he will communicate the fruits and effects to us. God is love; and herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his only-begotten Son. . . . Our love unto God ariseth from a sense of our own wants—our insufficiency to come unto rest in ourselves, or to attain unto blessedness by our own endeavors. In this state, seeing all in God, and expecting all from the suitableness of his excellencies unto our rest and satisfaction, our souls cleave unto him, with a desire of the nearest union whereof our natures are capable.

Owen, Volume 1.

A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ. Chapter 13.4. (1.)
[205]

The Son’s Accomplishment

Our likeness and conformity unto God consists herein; for it is the reparation of his image in us, Ephesians 4:23, 24; Colossians 3:10. Something, I hope, I apprehend concerning this image of God in believers, and of their likeness unto him, how great a privilege it is, what honor, safety, and security depend thereon, what duties are required of us on the account thereof; but perfectly to conceive or express the nature and glory of it we cannot attain unto, but should learn to adore the grace whence it doth proceed and is bestowed on us, to admire the love of Christ and the efficacy of his mediation, whereby it is renewed in us.

Owen, Volume 3. *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit.* Chapter 6. I. 2. (2.)

The Golden Chain

If one gives me a piece of land that is all around inclosed, the law gives me a way to it (though no express mention hereof in my deed,) so as to take the profits; his gift would otherwise little avail me. Salvation is that the elect are endowed with; faith and holiness the necessary way to their actual possession; and, therefore, these they must be ordained unto, and are, as well as to salvation itself: for, being “predestinate to the adoption of sons” Eph. 1:5, “and to be conformed to the

image of Christ” Rom. 8:28, (which is not perfectly accomplished until his appearing in glory) 1 John 3:2, they must be predestinated also to all those intermediate dispensations and graces which are requisite thereto. For, right to the end, gives right to the means; they are therefore said to be “chosen to salvation, through sanctification of the Spirit, and belief of the truth,” 2 Thess. 2:13. In order of intention, God wills the end first, and then the means: in order of execution, the means first, as directive to that end, Romans 8:30. The end is the cause of the means, Eph. 2:4, 5, and election the cause of them both, Eph. 2:8, 10.

Coles, *A Practical Discourse*, 190

An Answer to the Baxters of this World

Suppose a man that is on his journey knoweth himself to be in the right way, and that, passing on therein, he shall certainly and infallibly come to his journey’s end, especially if he will a little quicken his speed as occasion shall require, will you say that this is enough to make such a man careless and negligent, and that it would be much more to his advantage to be lost and bewildered in uncertain paths and ways, not knowing whither he goes, nor whether he shall ever arrive at his journey’s end? Common experience declares the contrary, as also how momentary and useless are those violent fits and gusts of endeavors which proceed from fear and uncertainty, both in things spiritual and temporal, or civil. Whilst men are under the power of actual impressions from such fears, they will convert to God, yea, they will [be turned around] and perfect holiness in an instant; but so soon as that impression wears off (as it will do on every occasion, and upon none at all), such persons are as dead and cold towards God as the lead or iron, which ran but now in a fiery stream, is when the heat is departed from it. It is that soul alone, ordinarily, which hath a comfortable assurance of God’s eternal, immutable, electing love, and thence of the blessed end of its own course of obedience, who goeth on constantly and evenly in a course of holiness, quickening his course and doubling his speed, as he hath occasion from trials or opportunities.

Owen, Vol. 3 *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*
Book 5. chap. 2. 2. (4.) 4. [730]

The Sovereignty of the One Who Began to Complete According to His Wisdom

God, who in infinite wisdom manageth the new creature or whole life of grace by his Spirit, doth so turn the streams of it, and so renew and change the especial kinds of its operations, as that we cannot easily trace his paths therein, and may, therefore, be often at a loss about it, as not knowing well what he is doing with us. For instance, it may be the work of grace and holiness hath greatly put forth and evidenced itself in the affections, which are renewed by it. Hence persons have great experience of readiness unto, and delight and cheerfulness in, holy duties, especially those of immediate intercourse with God; for the affections are quick and vigorous, for the most part, in the youth of profession, and the operations of them being sensible unto them in whom they are, and their fruits visible, they make persons seem always fresh and green in the ways of holiness. But it may be,

after awhile, it seems good to the sovereign Disposer of this affair to turn, as it were, the streams of grace and holiness into another channel. He sees that the exercise of humility, godly sorrow, fear, diligent conflicting with temptations, that, it may be, strike at the very root of faith and love, are more needful for them. He will, therefore, so order his dispensations towards them, by afflictions, temptations, occasions of life in the world, as that they shall have new work to do, and all the grace they have be turned into a new exercise. Hereon, it may be, they find not that sensible vigor in their spiritual affections, nor that delight in spiritual duties, which they have done formerly. This makes them sometimes ready to conclude that grace is decayed in them, that the springs of holiness are drying up, and they know neither where nor what they are. But yet, it may be, the real work of sanctification is still thriving and effectually carried on in them.

Owen, Vol. 3 Book 4. Chapter 2. 2 (2.) [3.]
[490-491]