John Owen between Orthodoxy and Modernity

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Vocatio as Regeneration: John Owen's Concept of Effectual Calling

Henk van den Belt

1 Introduction

When John Owen lists “ancient fathers,” “schoolmen,” and “modern divines,” it is quite clear that he reckons himself among those of the third group.¹ Although he did not have our notion of ‘modernity’ in mind, it still is an interesting question in which respects Owen preludes modernity, compared to church fathers, medieval scholastics and reformers.

For example, his congregationalism foreshadows modern protestant free-church ecclesiology. His view of the responsibility of the state for the church—illustrated by the modifications of the text of the *Westminster Confession* in the *Savoy Declaration*—differs from the catholic tradition since the emperor Constantine.² And perhaps one of the most modern aspects of his theology is that he writes scholastic theology mainly in the vernacular, though his ‘elephantine style’ indicates that he thinks in Latin instead of in English anyway.³ However, for our purposes in this chapter, we will focus on the question of Owen's concept of effectual calling as a way to place him between orthodoxy and modernity.

1 John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 16 vols. (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850–1853, repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965–1968), henceforth: Owen, *Works*, 10:45.

2 According to John Owen the magistrate did not have “the power to call synods, to be present at them and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 23) but should allow some liberty “in differences about the doctrines of the gospel, or ways of the worship of God” (*Savoy Declaration*, chapter 24).

3 According to his biographer Andrew Thomson, Owen “travels through it [his subject] with the elephant's grace and solid step, if sometimes also with his ungainly motion.” J. I. Packer, *Among God's Giants* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1991), 192. Cf. Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

1.1 *Soteriology*

The German philosopher of history and liberal theologian, Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), was of the opinion that Protestantism influenced the rise of the modern world with respect to the family, law, the state, economics and society, science and art, though only indirectly in all these fields. In his *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World* Troeltsch locates the most striking influence of the Reformation on modernity “in the actual central domain of Protestantism, that of religious thought and feeling.”⁴ Although his thesis can be contested, his notion that the Reformation influenced cultural individualization and that the roots of modern understanding of the human subject lie in the later developments of what he called ‘New Protestantism,’ remains intriguing.

The question for this chapter is, whether the work of John Owen, and especially his soteriology, offers any indication of Troeltsch’s shift “to personal subjective conviction, to the emotional experience of a sense of sin and of peace of heart.”⁵ In order to answer the question this chapter will examine Owen’s conception of calling. I will first turn to his definition of the term *vocatio*, then focus on Owen’s *Pneumatologia* to understand his restriction of the term to the inner work of the Spirit (i.e., the effectual calling), and finally discuss the extension of the outward call of the gospel. In the conclusion we will see if Owen’s approach fits in with Troeltsch’s conception of the development of Modernism in Protestantism.

2 The Use and Definition of *Vocatio*

Owen does not use the term *vocatio* or the English equivalent ‘vocation’ very often, though it occurs incidentally throughout his works. He, for instance, states that both eternal election and effectual vocation flow from the sovereignty of God.⁶ In one of his sermons he says that believers are dedicated to

4 Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: G. P. Putnam S Sons, 1912), 174. For the German text see Ernst Troeltsch, *Schriften zur Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die moderne Welt* (1906–1913), [Kritische Gesamtausgabe = KGA], (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001) 8:298. Troeltsch concludes that Protestantism is “the religion of conscience and conviction, without compulsorily imposed dogma [...], and a certainty based on inner feeling independent of all rational proofs.” Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress*, 195–196.

5 Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress*, 194.

6 Owen, *Works*, 7:157. For vocation he refers to Matthew 10:25–26.

God by their calling out of the world. They are called to be saints and separated unto God (Romans 1:7). “[T]hough this calling doth also imply effectual internal vocation, whereby the heart and nature is really sanctified yet it also includes an external separation and dedication unto God.”⁷

Mostly the term occurs in the context of a reference to the so-called golden chain of the *ordo salutis*, Romans 8:29–30. Owen, for instance, says that “our vocation [is] the first effect of our predestination.”⁸ He also argues that sanctification is included in the calling, because here Paul refers to effectual vocation, in which “a holy principle of spiritual life, or faith itself, is communicated unto us,”⁹ including sanctification radically—that is as a root—because sanctification is the effect of the calling as its adequate immediate cause. In the context of the order of salvation Owen sees the *vocatio* as the communication of a principle of spiritual life. The ‘effectual calling’—even in those cases in which Owen does not expressly use the term—is identified by Owen as the vivifying work of the Spirit, which he once compares with the resurrection of Lazarus, “Christ calls, and they come forth, the call being accompanied with life and power.”¹⁰

Whenever Owen uses the term ‘vocation,’ it refers to the irresistible work of the Spirit in the effectual calling of individuals who become believers through this calling. He generally uses verbs like ‘to call’ and ‘to invite’ and nouns like ‘calling’ and ‘invitation’ for the outward call of the gospel, although even ‘calling’ is often a synonym of conversion.¹¹

The call through the gospel is not unimportant. In refuting the ‘Arminian’ idea that heathens can be saved by general revelation without the knowledge of Christ he quotes Bernard, that many who want Plato to be a Christian, thereby prove themselves to be heathens. To underline the necessity of the gospel Owen says that none are glorified but those that are called (Romans 8:30) and that “all calling is instrumentally by the preaching of the Word and gospel” (Romans 10:14–15).¹²

This can be illustrated by a remarkable chart in one of Owen’s first works, the *Theomachia autexousiastikē: or, A display of Arminianisme*. In this chart Owen on the left side summarizes the Arminian position and on the right side the Reformed position.¹³ It is not clear how the eight aspects are related and

7 Owen, *Works*, 9:291.

8 Owen, *Works*, 10:64.

9 Owen, *Works*, 5:131.

10 Owen, *Works*, 2:203.

11 Owen, *Works*, 3:16, 352, 492. See also Owen, *Works* 6:290, 8:618.

12 Owen, *Works*, 10:113. The reference is to Bernard of Clairveaux’ criticism of Abelard. Bernard, *Ep.* 190.iv.9.

13 John Owen, *Theomachia autexousiastikē: or, A display of Arminianisme ...* (London, 1643), [xiii]. Cf. Owen, *Works* 10:10.

FIGURE 1 Chart of *Theomachia autexousiastike*: or, A display of Arminianisme

probably Owen does not have a strict logical or chronological order in mind. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that “the calling according to God’s immutable purpose” is mentioned only after the operation of the Spirit, efficacious Grace, and the infusion of habits. This implies that the call is the result of the infusion of new qualities into the soul by the Spirit in an act of special grace, which is in line with other statements by Owen.

2.1 Ecclesiology

One of the reasons for this emphasis on effectual calling—especially for the term ‘vocation’—might be its relationship with the Greek word for church: ‘ecclesia.’ In his two catechisms *The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ* from 1645, Owen discusses soteriology in the context of ecclesiology. For Owen the church essentially is the congregation of the elect who are savingly called into the community of the body of Christ. In the *Lesser Catechism*, for the younger children, he first asks: “Q. What is the church of Christ? A. The universal company of God’s elect, called to the adoption of children.”¹⁴ After stating that we become members of this church by true faith resting on God’s promises, he asks: “Q. How come we to have this faith? A. By the effectual working of the Spirit of God in our hearts, freely calling us from the state of nature to the state of grace.”¹⁵

14 Owen, *Works*, 1:468.
15 Owen, *Works*, 1:468.

In the *Greater Catechism* Owen elaborates on this theme. He defines the church as the company of God's elect, called by God, through Word and Spirit to be his children, united to Christ as the head, by faith, in the Spirit.¹⁶ Owen's definition hinges on the Greek *ekkaleō* from which *ecclesia* is derived. After defining the members of the church as the true believers in the chapter on faith, Owen discusses the vocation by stating that saving faith "is freely bestowed upon us and wrought in us by the Spirit of God, in our vocation or calling."¹⁷

This vocation is "the free, gracious act of Almighty God, whereby in Jesus Christ he calls and translates 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 Spirit in the preaching of the Word."¹⁸ In the margin he notes that effectual calling is the first effect of election and that we have no actual interest in Christ until we are thus called. Owen excludes any human effort from this 'translation' from the state of nature to that of grace and acknowledges that "all within the pale of the church are outwardly called by the Word, [but] none effectually but the elect."¹⁹

Thus, Owen's ecclesiology—dominated by the doctrine of election—undergirds his understanding of the *vocatio* as an effectual and saving work of the Spirit in the elect. For Owen this does not exclude the use of certain means. On the contrary, the catechism itself is a proof that he took pains in employing these means for the benefit of his congregation.²⁰ But it is not immediately clear from his definitions of the *vocatio* how he relates these means to the work of the Spirit in the divine call. To answer this question, we will turn to his extensive assessment of soteriology in his main treatise on the Holy Spirit.

3 Owen's "Pneumatologia"

In his *Pneumatologia* Owen stresses the importance of the outward means of grace, for instance by stating that "in the doctrinal instructions, precepts, promises, and threatenings of [Scripture] [...] we are commanded, pressed, persuaded, to turn ourselves and live to God."²¹ The means normally take effect on souls through the ministry of the church. The Word of God dispensed by the ministry of the church, is "the only ordinary outward means which the Holy

16 Owen, *Works*, 1:485.

17 Owen, *Works*, 1:486.

18 Owen, *Works*, 1:486.

19 Owen, *Works*, 1:487.

20 According to Owen, next to preaching nothing is more needful than catechizing, *Works*, 1:465.

21 Owen, *Works*, 3:302.

Ghost makes use of in the regeneration of the adult unto whom it is preached.”²² Owen underlines that the gospel itself is called the ministration of the Spirit; the ministry of the gospel—as opposed to that of the law—is called the ministry of the Spirit, because the Spirit’s presence is promised with the gospel.²³

On the other hand, however, preaching is not sufficient. Even the preaching of the prophets, of the apostles and of Jesus himself did not always have effect. Many people “sit all their days under the preaching of the Word, and yet have none of the effects [...] It is, therefore, the ministration of the Spirit, in and by the Word, which produces all or any of these effects on the minds of men; he is the fountain of all illumination.”²⁴ As such the claim that the Word of the gospel is ineffective without the work of the Spirit is in line with Reformed orthodox theology, but the way in which he relates—or especially does not relate—this work of the Spirit to the Word seem to differ from previous Reformed positions in some aspects.

Owen places the outward preaching of the gospel primarily in the phase of the preparatory work of the Spirit. For Owen the conviction of sin and the persuasion of the truth of the gospel belong to the preparation for true faith and regeneration. For this persuasion—which is merely a moral persuasion—the Spirit uses the Word of God or Scripture and as it is administered in the church. This persuasion is an effect of the instruction of the mind in the knowledge of God’s will, and because it is the truth of God this instruction in preaching is accompanied by a powerful persuasive efficacy.

Commenting on preaching, Owen states that the proclamation of the gospel appeals to the will and to the affections. It presents things to them that pertain to their highest good and happiness and that comprise the goal of human nature. The gospel proposes “God himself, as a friend, as reconciled unto us in Christ; and that in a way suited unto his holiness, righteousness, wisdom, and goodness.”²⁵ Reconciliation is set before the hearers in such a way that it can only be refused out of enmity against God himself. Preaching wrestles with the hearers by reasons and arguments from Scripture. Biblical proclamation declares that sin is the greatest debasement of human nature and ruins souls, explaining why the rejection of the gospel-invitation is foolish and unworthy of rational creatures and destructive forever. God has appointed “the preaching of the Word to be the means, the only outward ordinary means, for the

22 Owen, *Works*, 3:303. See also Owen, *Works* 10:135. “Fifthly, This saving grace, whereby the Lord converts or regenerates a sinner, translating him from death to life, is either external or internal. External consists in the preaching of the Word ...”.

23 Owen, *Works*, 3:26, 153.

24 Owen, *Works*, 3:236.

25 Owen, *Works*, 3:305.

conversion of the souls of men.”²⁶ Such ordained discourse is blessed by Him and accompanied with the power of the Holy Spirit.

But, notwithstanding all these remarks on the necessity and purposes of preaching, the operation of the Holy Spirit in all this is only “moral, and so metaphorical not real, proper, and physical.”²⁷ Owen maintains that preaching is necessary for us as a means through which the Spirit works, but it is not enough. What is indispensable next to it, “is a real physical work, whereby he infuses a gracious principle of spiritual life into all that are effectually converted and really regenerated.” The word ‘physical’ should not be understood as ‘material,’ but expresses that the effect of this work is immediate. Moral causes do not immediately actuate their effects without the intervention of something else, whereas real or physical causes do actuate their effects immediately.²⁸ Owen possibly borrows the use of this term from previous debates between the Jesuit Monists and their Dominican opponents who—following Thomas Aquinas—distinguished between moral and physical works of God. By a *moral* work God merely calls creatures to certain action by persuasion, while by a *physical* work he causes “the creature to genuinely act in a certain manner.”²⁹ Thus in his refutation of Arminianism, Owen copied arguments from internal conflicts within Roman Catholicism.

Owen also defends himself against those who suggest that he is thinking of an “extraordinary afflatus or inspiration” in his concept of the gospel.³⁰ Apparently some of his opponents saw a vulnerability in Owen’s position on this point. It is interesting that he felt a need to defend himself against the accusation of being too “spiritualistic.” This illustrates how he stood between “Rationalists” and “Enthusiasts.”³¹ To refute this accusation he turned to the example of the conversion of Augustine. Owen’s unnamed opponents may despise the doctrine of the irresistible and internal work of the Spirit, but even if they “swell themselves until they break, like the frog in the fable” they cannot

26 Owen, *Works*, 3:306 and cf. 303.

27 Owen, *Works*, 3:307.

28 For this distinction see Owen’s *Death of Death*, *Works*, 10:459 and for an extensive discussion of the issue see Gert van den Brink, “Impetration and Application in John Owen’s Theology,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic and Mark Jones (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 85–96, there 91–93.

29 Christopher Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 43. He argues that Owen derived this distinction from Diego Alvarez.

30 Owen, *Works*, 3:154.

31 For his rejection of the Quaker teaching about the inner light, see his *Pro Sacris Scripturis Exercitationes adversus Fanaticos* (1658), in *Works*, 16:426–476.

meet “the immortal wit, grace, and learning of that eminent champion of the truth and light of the age wherein he lived.”³²

3.1 *Voluntarism*

Owen's view of effectual calling flows from a soteriological application of the distinction between the faculties of the human soul.³³ The physical work of the Spirit in regeneration differs from all the preparations because they merely address the intellect and affections, while “the will of man remains absolutely indifferent whether it will admit of them or no, or whether it will convert itself unto God upon them or no.”³⁴ Whereas the Arminians leave the final step of acceptance of the gospel to the human free choice, Owen stresses that as long as the will remains un-renewed, the sinner is lost. According to Owen's way of thinking, the consequence of this move is that it ascribes the whole glory of conversion unto ourselves, and not to the grace of God. Furthermore, dependence on human free choice would also leave it uncertain if anyone in the world would be converted unto God.

In the margin of his catechism Owen remarks that “faith is in the understanding, in respect of its being and subsistence,—in the will and heart, in respect of its effectual working.”³⁵ In his *Pneumatologia*, however, he places the essence of true regeneration in the renewal of the will. Under the work of conviction “God is pleased secretly to communicate a principle of grace or spiritual life unto the will.”³⁶ This causes the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit that is a peculiar characteristic of the saving work of the Spirit and differs from the natural struggle between the conscience and the will. Whereas formerly the will was “absolutely bent on sin” after the receiving grace, the conflict starts within the will itself, as Augustine relates regarding conflict between the new will which loved God but was not able to overcome the old sinful will. “So my two wills, the one old, the other new, the one carnal,

32 Owen, *Works*, 3:366.

33 For an introduction in the faculty psychology in Owen's work, see Kelly M. Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 45–57.

34 Owen, *Works*, 3:308.

35 Owen, *Works*, 1:487. Cf. his remark that faith “doth not consist in, that it is not to be fully expressed by, any one single habit or act of the mind or will distinctly whatever.” Owen, *Works*, 5:100.

36 Owen, *Works*, 3:356. On Owen's voluntarism and in particular with respect to the effectual call, cf. Gavin John McGrath, “Puritans and the Human Will: Voluntarism within Mid-Seventeenth Century Puritanism as Seen in the Works of Richard Baxter and John Owen” (PhD diss., Durham University, 1989), 251–292.

the other spiritual, conflicted between themselves, and rent my soul by their disagreement.”³⁷

According to Owen, the will is not able to perform any spiritual act “without an ability wrought immediately in it by the power of the Spirit of God; or rather, unless the Spirit of God by his grace do effect the act of willing in it.”³⁸ Apparently, regeneration is essentially the renewal of the will, not only making the will able to believe, but also making it willing. The new birth is basically the renewal of one of the psychological faculties of the soul or the infusion of new habits into that faculty. This emphasis on the will in seventeenth-century Reformed theology was occasioned by the Arminian emphasis on the natural ability of the will to accept or reject the offer of grace. Owen shares this emphasis on the renewal of the will as the essence of conversion with earlier puritans like William Ames.³⁹

Owen claims that the most effectual use of the means is insufficient for regeneration. Indeed, in regeneration the Spirit, at least for those who are born again as adults, uses the Word—both law and gospel—and the ministry of the church, but this is insufficient without the immediate operation of the Spirit on the will, an operation which is of the same kind as with which he operated in the resurrection of Christ from the dead. The Spirit works “internally, immediately, efficiently, in and upon the minds of men in their regeneration.”⁴⁰

By this immediate work of the Spirit on the will Owen does not mean that the Spirit forces this faculty of the soul, but that he influences it in a way that is natural to it, turning, moving and drawing it according to its nature. The Spirit does no violence to the will, because then the will as a will would be destroyed. In its enmity the sinful will naturally opposes God. When the Spirit graciously and victoriously subdues the opposition, this act in the will precedes the will's own

37 Owen, *Works*, 3:356–357. Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* 8.5.

38 Owen, *Works*, 3:315.

39 While the *Heidelberg Catechism* defines faith as knowledge and trust, according to Ames in his explanation of the catechism it does not “properly consist in any knowledge (*notitia*), but in a solid and certain confidence (*fiducia*).” William Ames, *Christianae catechesos sciagraphia: ubi sub S. Scripturae textu apposito, singulae Dominica catech. reformatae breviter, solide, docte & perspicue enodantur, & suis documentis, usibus, & quaestionibus illustrantur* (Amsterdam, 1635), 41. It was translated as William Ames, *The Substance of Christian Religion, or, A Plain and Easie Draught of the Christian Catechisme In LII Lectures on Chosen Texts of Scripture, for Each Lords-Day of the Year* (London, 1659). For the quote cf. the recent annotated English translation is offered by Todd M. Rester. William Ames, *A Sketch of the Christian's Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 39. On Ames's locating faith in the will cf. Jan van Vliet, *Rise of the Reformed System: The Intellectual Heritage of William Ames* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2013).

40 Owen, *Works*, 3:317.

acting, “though in the same instant of time wherein the will is moved it moves, and when it is acted it acts itself, and preserves its own liberty in its exercise.”⁴¹

The will by nature is *mobilis* (fit to be moved), in the creating act of faith and obedience by the Spirit the will is *mota* (moved), and with respect to its own act it is *movens* (moving). Thus, in regeneration the *moveable* will is moved so that it starts to become a moving will. While Owen does not use this example, it may help to compare the will to a child on a swing who cannot reach the ground: she is movable, but she can’t move. But once someone gives her a push or a pull she starts to swing and keeps on moving.

Owen, however, does not explain how the gospel relates to this spiritual moving of the movable will that once moved also starts to move itself. How does this motivation tie in with the *vocatio* through the gospel? Put differently, how does the pushing force of the divine command in the law, or the pulling love of Christ in the gospel, relate to the movement of the will? Originally in Reformed theology the divine call to salvation was understood as a *duplex vocatio*: one calling by Word and Spirit with both an external and an internal side, that is only efficacious in the elect.⁴² In Owen’s theology both sides have become more independent, there even seem to be two *vocationes*: a *general* call by which God invites all to himself through the outward preaching of the Word and a *special* or *particular* call which is always efficacious and consists of the infusion of new habits into the soul in regeneration. Owen does not explain how the two callings are related and that is understandable given his understanding of the effectual calling as an immediate work of the Spirit on the will. Owen is not the only Puritan in whose theology the distinction between the two calls is substantial.⁴³

The work of the Spirit in regeneration “consists in a new, spiritual, supernatural, vital principle or habit of grace, infused into the soul, the mind, will, and affections, by the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁴ This understanding of grace as an infused quality is understandable over against Arminian optimism concerning the ability of the human will, but still it seems far distanced from the spontaneous reaction of the lost sinner to the gospel in trusting the promises through the Holy Spirit who opens the Word for the heart and the heart for the Word.

41 Owen, *Works*, 3:320.

42 For the *duplex vocatio*, see especially John Calvin’s *Institutes* 3.24.8.

43 John Bunyan, for instance, uses the striking example of a hen and chickens in the second part of his *Pilgrim’s Progress*; the hen has a common call all day long and a special call which she only has sometimes. “Now, said [the interpreter], compare this hen to your King [...] By his common call, he gives nothing; by his special call, he always has something to give.” John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 171.

44 Owen, *Works*, 3:329.

4 The Extent of the External Call

If the essence of regeneration is a physical or an immediate act of the Spirit in the renewal of the will of the elect, this not only evokes the question how this act of the Spirit relates to the Word, but also how the proclamation of law and gospel relate to those who are not elect. At least there is a tension in Owen's work with respect to the extent of the external call. He holds that all human beings should be reached by the proclamation of the gospel and that no one should be excluded from its message.⁴⁵ But, on the other hand, he sometimes restricts the call to believe in Christ to convinced sinners.

For instance, in his refutation of the Arminian notion of universal redemption in his *Death of Death*, he states that his opponents unfairly use the term 'free grace' with which they mean "that God loves all, and gave Christ to die for all, and is ready to save all, if they will come to him."⁴⁶ But according to Owen, free grace per definition cannot be universal: "What, I pray, is this your grace, free grace, that is universal? Is it the grace of election? Truly no; God hath not chosen all to salvation. [...] Is it the grace of effectual vocation? No, neither. Doubtless that it cannot be; for 'whom God calls he also justifies,' and 'glorifies,' [...] Nay, all have not been, are not, outwardly called."⁴⁷

A rejection of universalism or universal redemption does not have to restrict the outward and sincere call of the gospel to the elect or to the regenerate; possibly Owen is here only referring to the fact that not everyone hears the gospel. Owen does not deny the sincere call of all who hear the gospel, but he does restrict the promise of the gospel exclusively to those who truly repent. Christ in the gospel "calls unto him only those who are weary and heavily laden; affirms that the 'whole have no need of the physician, but the sick'; and that he 'came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'"⁴⁸ Christ offers the gospel only to those who are convinced of sin, burdened with it, and sought after deliverance. In other words, ordinarily, God by the law makes sinners sensible of their guilt and then calls them to faith in the promise and to justification.

Conviction is indispensable because Christ calls sinners to repentance. "As long as a man trusts in himself that he is righteous, Christ doth not call that man to believe."⁴⁹ Therefore Owen regards conviction of sin indispensably necessary before faith in Christ; "when a person is not really convinced that

45 See for example Owen, *Works*, 10:383.

46 Owen, *Works*, 10:411.

47 Owen, *Works*, 10:411.

48 Owen, *Works*, 5:76.

49 Owen, *Works*, 9:360.

he is not righteous, he is not under the call of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁰ Those who lack this previous conviction deceive themselves. “Many pretend to believe, though they never were convinced thoroughly that they were not righteous,—never were sick in their lives,—never had fears that they should die. These are contrary to the express rule Christ hath given, ‘I came not to call the righteous, but sinners’;—not those that say, ‘There is hope,’ but those that say, ‘There is no hope.’”⁵¹

In some other contexts Owen expresses himself in a more universal or at least indiscriminate way, not expressly restricting the call to convinced sinners. He is most explicit in a chapter that was added to his posthumously printed *Meditations on the Glory of Christ* (1684).⁵² There Owen invites the sinners to consider the condescension and love of Christ in calling them “to come unto him for life, deliverance, mercy, grace, peace, and eternal salvation.”⁵³ In the declaration and preaching of these invitations, “Jesus Christ yet stands before sinners, calling, inviting, encouraging them to come unto him.”⁵⁴ In the gospel preached, Christ himself is the author “as if he were present with you, stood amongst you, and spoke personally to every one of you. And because this would not suit his present state of glory, he hath appointed the ministers of the gospel to appear before you, and to deal with you in his stead, avowing as his own the invitations that are given you in his name.”⁵⁵ It is a bit uncertain however, if these additions are authentic and if they are, it is important to note that Owen did not authorize them for publishing.⁵⁶

50 Owen, *Works*, 9:360.

51 Owen, *Works*, 9:361.

52 The second edition of 1691 contains two new chapters, the first of which is titled “Application of the foregoing Meditations concerning the Glory of Christ. First in an Exhortation unto such as are not yet Partakers of Him.” John Owen, *Meditations and discourses concerning the glory of Christ applyed unto unconverted sinners, and saints under spiritual decays: in two chapters, from John XVII, xxiv* (London: Printed by J. A. for William Marshall, 1691), 201. The editor of the *Works* mistakenly mentions 1696 as the first year of the publication of these additional chapters. Owen, *Works*, 1:274.

53 Owen, *Works*, 1:422.

54 Owen, *Works*, 1:422.

55 Owen, *Works*, 1:422; Owen refers to 2 Cor. 5:19, 20.

56 The strong claim in the preface of the first print that the omission of the twofold application in 1684 “rendered the book imperfect to judicious Readers” and that anyone familiar with his writings will need no assurance that Owen was the author makes a critical reader a little suspicious. “To the Reader” in Owen, *Meditations and discourses*, [i]. Two other editions of the *Meditations* from 1691 do not contain these additional chapters: John Owen, *Meditations and discourses on the glory of Christ, in his person, office, and grace with the differences between faith and sight applied unto the use of them that believe* (London: Printed by B.A., 1691) and John Owen, *Meditations and discourses on the glory*

5 Conclusion

As we have seen, Owen understands the *vocatio* as the effectual calling or as regeneration of the elect. In calling them, God efficaciously transfers or ‘translates’ them from the state of nature into the state of grace, because they are united to Christ through the work of his Spirit. This understanding runs parallel with his ecclesiological view of a church of true believers. The ‘translation’ that takes place in the *vocatio* is essentially a renewal of the will in a ‘physical’ or immediate act of the Spirit upon the will, after a phase of preparatory grace in which the Spirit works through the Word merely in a moral way, by persuasion. Though Owen does not restrict the call of the gospel to the elect, he does claim that only truly repentant sinners are called to believe in Christ offered in the promises of the gospel; this might be interpreted as a leaning towards what is later called hyper-Calvinism.⁵⁷

Troeltsch’s thesis was that Protestantism caused a shift in the realm of religion from the objective and sacramental grace of the Middle Ages to a religion based on personal conviction and the emotional experience of a sense of sin and of peace of heart. John Owen’s understanding of the *vocatio* illustrates this shift and underlines the tendency in puritanism and other forms of pietistic Protestantism towards internalization.

Owen uses the terminology and distinctions from the long tradition of ‘Christian Aristolianism’ to defend the Reformed position on free grace over against Arminianism. For example, in his understanding of the faculties of the soul. Additionally, he employed medieval scholastic distinctions—such as the one between ‘moral’ and ‘physical,’ possibly borrowing them from more recent discussions on the nature of grace in Roman Catholic debates. In this use of the earlier tradition Owen does not seem to be modern at all.

of Christ, in his person, office & grace: with the differences between faith and sight. Applied to the use of them that believe (London: Printed, for John Taylor at the Ship, and Richard Wilde at the Map of the World in S. Paul’s Church-Yard, 1691). The publisher of the edition with the additional chapters, William Marshall, also issued Tobias Crisp’s *Christ alone exalted* one year earlier, including sermons “faithfully” transcribed from his notes, with the claim that this was all that would ever be printed of Crisp. Tobias Crisp, *Christ alone exalted being the compleat works of Tobias Crisp, D. D., containing XLII sermons ... which were formerly printed in three small volumes ... to which is now added ten sermons, whereof eight were never before printed faithfully transcribed from his own notes, which is all that will ever be printed of the said Doctor’s* (London: Printed for William Marshall, 1690).

57 Foord concludes that Owen’s understanding of the free gospel offer tends toward the eighteenth century hyper-Calvinism; Martin Foord, “John Owen’s Gospel Offer: Well-Meant or Not?” in Kapic and Jones, *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, 283–295, there, 295.

In Troeltsch's distinction between Old and New Protestantism Owen belongs primarily to the Old Protestantism. Troeltsch understood that as a tradition which based its theology on revelation and focused on supernatural salvation. For Troeltsch, New Protestantism basically stands for the theological liberalism that denies the supernatural and he himself advocated such a position. Of course, Owen does not fit into that picture.⁵⁸

But that is not the whole story, for there are certain aspects in Owen's theology that can indeed be interpreted as 'modern' in Troeltsch's understanding. One of the main features of New Protestantism lies in the fact that religious organisations and communities are no longer formed by the state, but are a matter of voluntary and personal conviction based on a principal acknowledgement of a variety of religious convictions and communities next to each other.⁵⁹ In that sense, Owen's ecclesiology and his view of tolerance, place him within Troeltsch's New Protestantism.

In a certain sense, even Owen's soteriology reveals a modern tendency, because it is an orthodox Reformed example of the modern turn to Christianity as an individual or personal religion of the heart. Owen is also a 'new protestant,' because his soteriology is intimately connected to his Congregationalist ecclesiology and because it is voluntarist—the personal decision of the will of the individual is decisive—be it that this choice of the movable will to move towards Christ presupposes the work of the moving Holy Spirit.

Owen's soteriology is typical for the development within the Reformed tradition in which the source of certainty shifts gradually from the promise of the gospel (*extra nos*) to the discernment of the work of the Spirit in granting faith to the individual believer (*in nobis*). Though understandable as a reaction against the Arminian understanding of faith as a choice of the individual, Reformed orthodox theology stresses that the faith is ingenerated in the individual in the regeneration of the soul and thereby moves away from the content of the divine call, the gospel of Christ crucified, towards the hidden efficaciousness of that gospel in the application of salvation to the soul.

58 On Troeltsch's view of Old and New Protestantism see Arie L. Molendijk, "Ernst Troeltsch's Lasting Contribution to the Historiography of Christianity," in *Mitteilungen der Ernst-Troeltsch-Gesellschaft* 18 (2005): 16–37, there 26–27.

59 Troeltsch, *KGA*, 8:225.

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