

The Fourfold Context of John Owen's *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer* (1682)

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John Owen (1616–1683) considered prayer the heart of all religion: “All men will readily acknowledge that as without it [prayer] there can be no religion at all, so the life and exercise of all religion doth principally consist therein.”¹ For Owen, prayer was an indispensable element of religion, as he again said: “without it there neither is nor can be the exercise of any religion in the world.”² Owen discussed the subject of prayer at length in his treatise, *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer*, written in 1682.³ In this treatise Owen thought and wrote inseparably as a theologian of the Holy Spirit, a polemicist, a Puritan Renaissance man, and a pastor.⁴ Thus, this article will examine Owen’s discourse in light of these four contexts: (1) pneumatological; (2) polemical; (3) the Puritans as a Renaissance movement; and (4) pastoral.

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¹ John Owen, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer,” in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 4, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust), 237.

² *Ibid.*, 251.

³ This discourse is Owen’s seventh book on his whole work on pneumatology in the edition of William H. Goold, volumes 3 & 4, first published by Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-53, then reprinted by the Banner of Truth Trust in 1967.

⁴ Owen’s style in writing can be generally categorized into four aspects: (1) exegesis; (2) systematic theology; (3) polemics; and (4) practical application. He would first exegete the text, then draw theology out of his exegesis, and once the doctrine had been drawn, he deduced some practical applications, and oftentimes dialogued polemically with others who had different views of the doctrine he was studying. Hence, he wrote as an exegete, systematic theologian, polemicist, and pastor. This style is also seen in other Puritans.

The Pneumatological Context

Owen did not really write a book on prayer *per se*. His *Communion with God* (1657),⁵ which is often thought to be a work on prayer, is not really about prayer; it is rather a doctrinal and experiential treatise on the Trinity. Timothy George states that *Communion with God* is Owen's "classic study of Trinitarian spirituality."⁶ Moreover, *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer*, while it deals with the subject of prayer, is not a general discourse on prayer, but on the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of prayer. William H. Goold, in his *Prefatory Note* to Owen's treatise, pointed out:

The treatise itself unfolds the evidence and nature of the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit in prayer, and would be esteemed meager and incomplete if it were regarded as a treatise on the whole subject of prayer. To understand its precise scope, it must be considered simply as another book in the general work of our author on the dispensation and operations of the Holy Spirit. Even the subsidiary discussions, on the mental prayer of the church of Rome, and the use of devotional formulas, are evidently connected with the peculiar and distinctive object of the treatise,—as designed to illustrate the operations of the Spirit in the devotional exercise of believers.⁷

From Owen's *Preface to the Reader* itself, it is clear that his purpose principally pertains to the subject of the Holy Spirit:

This is the design of the ensuing discourse. There is in the Scripture a promise of the Holy Ghost to be given unto the church as "a Spirit of grace and of supplications." As such, also, there are particular operations ascribed unto him. Mention is likewise frequently made of the aids and assistances which he affords unto believers in and unto prayers. Hence they are said to "pray always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit."⁸

Owen further explained: "The inquiries before us are concerning the nature of the work of the Holy Spirit in the aids and assistances which he gives unto believers in and unto

⁵ John Owen, "Communion with God," in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 2, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 1-274. This treatise has been revised and edited by Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor to make it accessible to modern readers. See John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, eds. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007).

⁶ Timothy George, Blurb to John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, eds. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor.

⁷ Owen, "The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer," 236.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 237, 254.

their prayers, according unto the mind of God.”⁹ Again in the beginning of the body of his treatise, he said, “my purpose is not to treat of the nature, necessity, properties, uses, effects, and advantages, of this gracious duty [i.e. prayer]....The interest of the Holy Spirit of God by his gracious operations in it is that alone which I shall inquire into.”¹⁰

It is therefore essential to read Owen’s treatise, and to understand his thoughts on prayer in a pneumatological context. Goold is right to assert that this disquisition is part of Owen’s general work on pneumatology.¹¹ Sinclair Ferguson puts it this way:

Owen gave the theme of prayer extended treatment in only one place, in the context of his work on the Holy Spirit. It is therefore concerned particularly with the work of the Spirit in prayer, and is characterized by the vigour and strength of the doctrine of prayer elucidated in the reformed tradition of the previous century.”¹²

Nevertheless this treatise may be considered Owen’s most comprehensive published work in regard to prayer.

Owen as a Primary Theologian of the Holy Spirit

Owen wrote on prayer as a primary theologian of the Holy Spirit. His concept of prayer is framed by his doctrine of the Spirit.¹³ In fact, he is regarded as “a pioneer in the doctrine of the Spirit.”¹⁴ Goold stated, “It has sometimes been questioned if Owen, with all his excellencies and gifts, has any claim to be regarded as an original thinker [i.e., of the doctrine of the Spirit]. This treatise of itself substantiates such a claim in his behalf.”¹⁵

⁹ Ibid., 238.

¹⁰ Ibid., 252.

¹¹ Ibid., 236.

¹² Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 224.

¹³ For an in-depth study of Owen’s pneumatology, see Dale A. Stover, “The Pneumatology of John Owen: A Study of the Role of the Holy Spirit in Relation to the Shape of a Theology” (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 1967).

¹⁴ Don Marvin Everson, “The Puritan Theology of John Owen” (Th. D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1959), 12.

¹⁵ Owen, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer,” 4. Goold was referring to Owen’s *The Reason of Faith* (1677), which is Owen’s sixth book in his entire work on pneumatology.

Owen himself seems to have claimed this title for himself: “I know not any who ever went before me in this design of representing the whole economy of the Holy Spirit, with all his adjuncts, operations, and effects. . . .”¹⁶ Geoffrey Nuttall gives an interesting annotation to this statement:

When John Owen . . . declares, ‘I know not of any who ever went before me in this Design of representing the whole economy of the Holy Spirit’, he is neither ignorant of, nor antagonistic to, the work of the early Fathers . . . Neither Owen nor any of his fellow authors is concerned to deny or to controvert the classic expositions of the doctrine. Their concern is rather to draw out its implications for faith and practice. What is new, and what justifies Owen in his claim to be among the pioneers, is the place given in Puritan exposition to experience, and its acceptance as a primary authority, in the way indicated in the passage just quoted. The interest is primarily not dogmatic, at least not in any theoretic sense, it is experimental. There is theology, but, in a way which has hardly been known since St. Augustine, it is a *theologia pectoris* [theology of the heart].¹⁷

Owen as a Practical Theologian of the Holy Spirit

From Nuttall’s assertion, what is fascinating about Owen as a pneumatologist is that he was not only concerned with the theology of the Holy Spirit, but also with the application of that theology to other dimensions of doctrine and life. Ferguson observes that it was Owen’s passion to translate “knowledge into experience.”¹⁸ Owen answered inquiries not only about the person of the Spirit, but about His work as well; thus, his treatise is specifically on *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer*. In this concern for application and experience he differed from other theologians who had gone before him. As Ferguson says:

He was well aware that a number of the Church Fathers of the first five centuries had written on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit (Owen was familiar with the work of such great early luminaries as Cyprian, Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom, as well as others). But their chief concern

¹⁶ Owen, *Works*, 3:7.

¹⁷ Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7.

¹⁸ John Owen and Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit: His Gifts and Power* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Heritage, 2004), 24.

was the Spirit's divine identity. While Owen lays emphasis on this, he is also concerned to expound how the Spirit works.¹⁹

Don Everson also stresses a similar point, comparing Owen with the French Reformer, John Calvin. "Calvin had a doctrine of the Holy Spirit," says Everson, "but it was '...a necessity of thought rather than something known in experience.' In Owen's thought, the work of the Spirit of God touched and colored almost all of the Christian revelation and the Christian life."²⁰ One may disagree with Everson that Calvin's pneumatology was '...a necessity of thought rather than something known in experience.' Roy Walter Williams, for instance, states that "Calvin had a distinctive doctrine of the Holy Spirit which included both objective theories and subjective experience; sometimes he combined both, as he did in his concept of the self-authentication of the Scripture through the indwelling Spirit in the Christian."²¹ However, this experiential pneumatology already found in Calvin (and in other Reformers), did not reach its maturity until the time of the Puritans, who brought it to its pinnacle. As Williams says: "experiential pneumatology" is a "unique contribution of the Puritans."²² Ferguson notes that it was the Reformers who recovered "an understanding and experience of the role of the Holy Spirit in the church and in the individual."²³ But it was the Puritans who developed it. Williams further claims that "the economy of the Holy Spirit in prayer was a central concept for both Puritan doctrine of the Christian life and the worship of the church."²⁴ This special emphasis on the Spirit's work in prayer is conspicuous in the treatise of Owen in whose writings experiential pneumatology "finds its culmination," as Williams says²⁵

¹⁹ Ibid., 23.

²⁰ Everson, "The Puritan Theology of John Owen," 12.

²¹ Roy Walter Williams, "The Puritan Concept and Practice of Prayer" (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1982), 84.

²² Ibid., 81.

²³ Sinclair Ferguson, "John Owen and the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," in *John Owen—the man and his theology*, ed. Robert W. Oliver (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing Company, 2002), 103.

²⁴ Williams, "The Puritan Concept and Practice of Prayer," 94.

²⁵ Ibid., 86.

Unlike Owen, Calvin devoted many pages to the subject of prayer in his *Institutes*.²⁶ Yet as far as pneumatological emphasis on prayer is concerned, Owen undoubtedly surpassed Calvin.²⁷ Why did Owen stress the pneumatological dimension of prayer? Owen wrote: "...it cannot be denied but that the work and actings of the Spirit of grace in and towards believers with respect unto the duty of prayer are more frequently and expressly asserted in the Scripture than his operations with respect unto any other particular grace or duty whatever."²⁸ Owen saw that the Scripture itself puts special emphasis on the Spirit's role in prayer. "Without this [i.e. the Spirit's work]...it will be granted that no man can pray as he ought."²⁹

The Polemical Context

Owen not only wrote as a theologian of the Holy Spirit on the subject of prayer; he also wrote as a polemicist, as one engaged in a battle of ideas. One reason why Owen was concerned to study of the operation of the Spirit in prayer is that he wanted to provide biblical teaching to refute erroneous persuasions and practices of prayer that he found to be rooted in unbiblical pneumatology. Carl Trueman, in light of all of Owen's writings, groups Owen's theological opponents into three broad categories: Papists, Arminians, and Socinians. He says, "Of these three, the Papists were the least important to Owen and took up proportionately less of his time."³⁰ Ferguson, on the other hand, in the context of Owen's entire discourse on the Spirit, sees three polemical targets: "[1] Ritualism that retains a form of godliness but has no experience of its power; [2] rationalism that is

²⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2001), 850–920. For an analysis of Calvin's view of prayer, see Joel R. Beeke, "John Calvin on Prayer as Communion with God," in *Taking Hold of God: Reformed and Puritan Perspectives on Prayer*, eds. Joel R. Beeke and Brian G. Najapfour (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books), 27-42.

²⁷ Calvin has a section called 'The Holy Spirit aids right prayer' in his treatise on prayer in the *Institutes*. But it only covers about one page of his 70-page treatise on prayer. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 855-56.

²⁸ Owen, "The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer," 253.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 271. See also *Ibid.*, 259, 312.

³⁰ Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle, UK.: Paternoster, 1998), 19.

rooted in man rather than in revelation; [3] spiritualism that placed its stress on the immediacy of experiences rather than on the already given revelation in Scripture.”³¹ In Owen’s *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer*, his polemics are directed at the Roman Catholic Church, as the chief proponents of empty ritualism.

Owen’s Polemical Opponents: the Papists

Owen was particularly concerned with the issue of the use of forms of prayer found in the chief Roman liturgical books—the Roman Breviary and the Missal.³² In particular, Owen’s last two chapters address this issue.³³ To Owen, the use of these “*set or humanly-devised forms of prayer*”³⁴ is by implication a rejection of the aids and assistances of the Holy Spirit in prayer. Owen argued that nowhere in the Scripture are Christians commanded to compose prayers for others; they are commanded to pray for others, but not to write prayers for them.³⁵ Nonetheless, Owen was not completely against the use of forms of prayer. He explained, “*Whatever forms of prayer were given out unto the use of the church by divine authority and inspiration, as the Lord’s Prayer and the Psalms or Prayers of David, they are to have their everlasting use therein, according unto what they were designed unto.*”³⁶ So while Owen ardently repudiates the use of any set or written prayers, he made an exception for prayers found in the Scriptures.

Owen’s Principles in Prayer

Owen had two rules of judgment that he used in his treatise to address his polemical target: “Scripture revelation and spiritual experience of them that do believe.”³⁷ But along

³¹ Owen and Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit: His Gifts and Power*, 23.

³² Owen, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer,” 238, 241.

³³ *Ibid.*, 328-50.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 240.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

with these two, he adds what he calls “some generally-allowed principles.”³⁸ These three rules will be briefly discussed below.

1. Scripture revelation.

Owen, like the Reformers, held the *sola scriptura* principle, which states that the sacred Scripture is the only authoritative source for faith and practice. Owen applied this principle to his theology of prayer, asserting that prayer must be regulated by Scripture alone. In his *Preface to the Reader*, he said: “All other reasonings, from customs, traditions, and feigned consequences, are here of no use.”³⁹ Owen was talking about the Roman Catholic Church, which reasoned from her traditions to justify the content and form of her prayers. He also mentioned, in the context of forms of prayer found in the Roman Missal, that “common people, at least of the communion of the papal church, do believe it [Mass book] to be as much of a divine original as the Scripture....”⁴⁰ Owen, on the other hand, with his *sola scriptura* principle, based his reasoning on his exposition of the Scripture: “Wherefore, the foundation of the whole ensuing discourse is laid in the consideration and exposition of some of those texts of Scripture wherein these things are expressly revealed and proposed unto us....”⁴¹ Owen put Scripture above tradition. Owen’s regulative principle in prayer is the ground of his frequent mention of praying “according to the mind of God,”⁴² by which he means praying according to the word of God, as opposed to the traditions of men.

2. Spiritual experience.

Owen’s second rule of judgment is the “spiritual experience of them that do believe,” which he did not elaborate. However, aware of fallen man’s tendency to false kinds of spirituality, he asserted that this spiritual experience “is to be regulated by the former [i.e.,

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 241.

⁴¹ Ibid, 238.

⁴² Ibid.

Scripture revelation].”⁴³ He went on to say that once this spiritual experience is regulated by the Scripture, “it is a safe rule unto them in whom it is.”⁴⁴ So the addition of this spiritual experience does not contradict Owen’s *sola scriptura* principle. He rather sought to avoid yet another tendency of fallen man, to a ritualism devoid of genuine spiritual life and power. For Owen, prayer must be both scriptural and experiential.

At the end of his discussion concerning these two rules of judgment, Owen concluded,

*The substance of what we plead from Scripture and experience is only this, That whereas God hath graciously promised his Holy Spirit, as a Spirit of grace and supplications, unto them that do believe, enabling them to pray according to his mind and will, in all the circumstances and capacities wherein they are, or which they may be called unto, it is the duty of them who are enlightened with the truth hereof to expect those promised aids and assistances in and unto their prayers, and to pray according to the ability which they receive thereby.*⁴⁵

3. Some generally-allowed principles.

Besides the two rules of judgment mentioned already, Owen appends what he describes as “some generally-allowed principles” in prayer: “But moreover, as was before intimated, there are some generally-allowed principles, which, though not always duly considered, yet cannot at any time be modestly denied, that give direction towards the right performance of our duty herein.”⁴⁶ Then he enumerated eight principles.

- 1) “It is the duty of every man to pray for himself.”
- 2) “It is the duty of some, by virtue of natural relation or of office, to pray with and for others also.”
- 3) “Every one who prayeth, either by himself and for himself, or with others and for them, is obliged, as unto all the uses, properties, and circumstances of prayer, to pray as well as he is able....”
- 4) “In our reasonable service, the best wherewith we can serve God consists in the intense, sincere actings of the faculties and affections of our minds, according unto their respective powers, through the use of the best assistances we can attain.”

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 239.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

- 5) “There is no man but, in the use of the aids which God hath prepared for that purpose, is able to pray according to the will of God, and as he is in duty obliged, whether he pray by himself and for himself, or with others and for them also.”
- 6) “We are expressly commanded to pray, but are nowhere commanded to make prayers for ourselves, much less for others.”
- 7) “There is assistance promised unto believers to enable them to pray according unto the will of God; there is no assistance promised to enable any to make prayers for others.”
- 8) “Whatever forms of prayer were given out unto the use of the church by divine authority and inspiration, as the Lord’s Prayer and the Psalms or Prayers of David, they are to have their everlasting use therein, according unto what they were designed unto.”⁴⁷

These eight principles stand as a concise summation of Owen’s treatise on prayer.

The Puritan Renaissance Context

Owen was beyond doubt a Puritan. He was in fact born in a place “noted for its Puritan and Reformed sympathies.”⁴⁸ But Owen can also be called a Puritan Renaissance man, as Sebastian Rehnman says: “The plurality of influences present in Owen’s thought firmly establishes him as a typical Renaissance man.”⁴⁹ This plurality of influences includes a return to patristic and medieval roots. In *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer*, Owen cited church fathers (Didymus the Blind, Chrysostom, Origen, and Augustine)⁵⁰ and medieval writers (Bernard of Clairvaux, John Damascene, and the Venerable Bede)⁵¹ to strengthen his Reformed perspective on prayer. Interestingly, Owen did not refer to the works of the Protestant Reformers in his treatise. One reason for this may be “the habit of seventeenth century authors of refraining from referring to contemporary authors because those of great antiquity were more fashionable.”⁵²

⁴⁷ Ibid, 239–40.

⁴⁸ Sebastian Rehnman, “John Owen: A Reformed Scholastic at Oxford,” in *Reformation and Scholasticism*, eds. Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2001), 181.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 186.

⁵⁰ Owen, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer,” 255, 268, 285, 330.

⁵¹ Ibid., 281, 286, 330.

⁵² Rehnman, “John Owen: A Reformed Scholastic at Oxford,” 185.

Owen also quoted pagan authors (Livy, Virgil, and Cato the Elder)⁵³ for the same purpose—to fortify his theological argument in his discourse. The quoting of these pagan writers shows something about Owen’s character—that he would not hesitate to use pagan classical writings in support of his Reformed position.⁵⁴ Owen also dialogued with Plotinus⁵⁵ (a pagan philosopher, who had been influential to some of the church Fathers) and Cressey⁵⁶ (a seventeenth century writer and supporter of the pope). This proves Owen to be well-versed in both classical and contemporary writings of his day. His treatise is a masterpiece that reflects his scholarship as a Puritan Renaissance man.

The Pastoral Context

Owen’s pastoral heart can be seen in his words when after surveying his polemical opponents, he says: “That which should principally guide us in the management of this inquiry is, that it be done unto spiritual advantage and edification, without strife or contention.”⁵⁷ So while writing as a theologian and polemicist, Owen was very pastoral in his heart. He did not write to merely investigate the truth and refute errors, but to also promote spiritual growth. Ferguson testifies of this: “My own reading of Owen has convinced me that everything he wrote for his contemporaries had a practical and pastoral aim in view—the promotion of true Christian living.”⁵⁸

Owen’s pastoral concern is also evident by the way he practically applied his teachings to church members. For instance, after asserting that “*It is the duty of some, by virtue of natural relation or of office, to pray with and for others also,*”⁵⁹ he addressed Christian parents: “So is it the duty of parents and masters of families to pray with and

⁵³ Owen, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer,” 257-58.

⁵⁴ Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 15.

⁵⁵ Owen, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer,” 329.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 247, 328.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁵⁸ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, xi.

⁵⁹ Owen, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer,” 239.

for their children and households.” He also addressed his fellow pastors, saying: “In the like manner it is the duty of ministers to pray with and for their flocks, by virtue of special institution.”⁶⁰ This is noteworthy because so much of Owen’s book is theological and polemical in nature; but, as John Piper says, “He [Owen] was always essentially a pastor....All of his writing was done in the press of pastoral duties.”⁶¹

Hence, Owen as a pneumatologist probed the truth; as a polemicist he protected the truth; as a Puritan Renaissance man, he reinforced the truth with appeals to patristic, medieval, and even pagan sources; and finally, as a pastor he practiced the truth.

Owen’s Practical Definition of Prayer

Despite his deep theological reflection, Owen defined prayer in a very practical way: “a gift, ability, or spiritual faculty of exercising faith, love, reverence, fear, delight, and other graces, in a way of vocal requests, supplication, and praises unto God.”⁶² Prayer is “the most natural and most eminent way and means of our converse with God....”⁶³ It is “the vital breath of our spiritual life unto God.”⁶⁴ It is a gracious duty of those who believe in God, as Owen said: “To own a Divine Being is to own that which is to be prayed for unto, and that it is our duty so to do.”⁶⁵ Prayer is an acknowledgment of the presence of God. Therefore, to neglect to pray is “a sufficient evidence of practical atheism (for he that prayeth not says in his heart, ‘There is no God’).”⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Ibid. See also Ibid., 313.

⁶¹ John Piper, *Contending for Our All: Defending Truth and Treasuring Christ in the Lives of Athanasius, John Owen, and J. Gresham Machen* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 89.

⁶² Owen, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer,” 271.

⁶³ Ibid, 252.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 239.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Owen's Concept of the Holiness of Prayer

One thing that deserves attention in Owen's treatise is his emphasis on holiness in regard to prayer. He calls prayer a "holy practice."⁶⁷ Prayer, for Owen, is a "holy intercourse with God," which includes a "holy delight in God."⁶⁸ On one occasion, he said that to deny the peculiar aids and assistance of the Holy Spirit in prayer is "to overthrow the foundation of the holiness and comfort of all believers."⁶⁹ Thus, in Owen's thinking, biblical prayer is foundational to Christian holiness. Owen explained to his readers that the Holy Spirit helps them to pray, "that the issue of their supplication may be the *improvement of holiness* in them, and thereby their conformity unto God, with their nearer access unto him."⁷⁰ In short, prayer must be for the advancement of our sanctification, or growth in holiness. It must make us more and more godly. If this is not the case, says Owen, our prayer is "an abomination" to the Lord,⁷¹ because our practice of prayer must produce progress in our personal piety. Indeed, this is Owen's goal in life, the pursuit of holiness. Piper says, "From his writings and from the testimony of others it seems fair to say that the aim of personal holiness in all of life, and the mortifying of all known sin, really was the labor not only of his teaching but of his personal life."⁷²

It is not then an exaggeration when David Clarkson, during the funeral service of Owen, gave this address: "I need not to tell you of this who knew him, that it was his great Design to promote Holiness in the Life and Exercise of it among you...."⁷³

Conclusion

John Owen's view of prayer can be best seen in *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer*. Though this book was written primarily as a treatise on the Spirit, it is here that Owen

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 291.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 248.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 286.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Piper, *Contending for Our All*, 99.

⁷³ Cited in Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, xiii.

reveals his thoughts on prayer explicitly and extensively. One also finds here Owen writing on prayer simultaneously as a pneumatologist, polemist, Puritan Renaissance writer, and pastor. As a pneumatologist, he explored prayer as a dimension of the theology of the Holy Spirit; as a polemicist, he protected the biblical doctrine and practice of prayer from the corruptions of his theological opponents; as a Puritan Renaissance writer, he supported up his position with the use of patristic, medieval, and even pagan sources; and as a pastor, he put this doctrine of prayer experientially into practical application.