

Selected Biographies

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the information contained in the biographies of three eminent Puritan figures: John Flavel, John Owen, and Thomas Boston. It is written with a particular focus, not only on the tremendous character of these men, but on the poignant lessons one can learn from their lives. Although not intended to be a simple rehearsal of the biographies themselves, the more noteworthy biographical details have been provided so as to ensure the reader has an appropriate historical context in which to place what has been written. The primary source materials for this paper are *Life of the Late Reverend, Mr. John Flavel* by Erasmus Middleton, *Life of Dr. Owen* by Andrew Thomson, and *Memoirs of the Life, Time, and Writings of the Reverend and Learned Thomas Boston, M.A.* by Thomas Boston.

## John Flavel

John Flavel, son of minister Richard Flavel, was born in Worcestershire in 1628. Educated in religious matters by his father, John received his formal education at University College, Oxford where he excelled in all of his studies. In 1650, while studying for his bachelor's degree, the young Flavel was appointed to assist the ailing minister of Diptford, one Mr. Walplate. Only months following his April appointment, on October 17, 1650, Flavel was examined and ordained into gospel ministry by the presbyters at Salisbury.

Following his ordination, Flavel returned to Diptford where, upon the death of Mr. Walplate, the presbytery appointed him as Walplate's replacement. Shortly thereafter, Flavel married his first wife, Jane Randal. Sadly, however, she and the couple's first child died during labor. Following the customary year of mourning, Flavel married a second time before accepting the call to replace the recently deceased Reverend Anthony Hartford as the minister of the church at Dartmouth.

One of the most enlightening observations concerning Flavel's life up to this point is how much his experience early on reveals about how Christian ministry, in general, was viewed then as compared to now. Most impressive is the rigorous methodology employed by those of Flavel's day who bore the responsibility for examining, approving, ordaining, and installing those called to serve as undershepherds of Christ's sheep. Conversely, in many churches today, this once rigorous process of personal examination and careful validation of ministerial candidates seems to have waned or, in the worst cases, have been abandoned altogether. Today, greater emphasis is often placed on one's seminary credentials and/or personal connections as being more important determining factors as to one's ministerial suitability than actual Scriptural qualifications (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Not surprisingly, this pragmatic approach tends to contribute not only to the flock's spiritual malnutrition but to an unavoidable depreciation and devaluing of the pastoral ministry itself. The church-at-large would do well to return to a view of pastoral ministry similar to that expressed by Mather (2010) who wrote:

The office of the Christian ministry, rightly understood, is the most honorable, and important, that any man in the whole world can ever sustain; and it will be one of the wonders and employments of eternity to consider the reasons why the wisdom and goodness of God assigned this office to imperfect and guilty man! ... The great design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher are to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men; to display in the most lively colors, and proclaim in the clearest language, the wonderful perfections, offices and grace of the Son of God; and to attract the souls of men into a state of everlasting friendship with him. ... It is a work which an angel might wish for, as an honor to his character; yea, an office which every angel in heaven might covet to be employed in for a thousand years to come. It is such an

honorable, important and useful office, that if a man be put into it by God, and made faithful and successful through life, he may look down with disdain upon a crown, and shed a tear of pity on the brightest monarch on earth. (p. v)

As Middleton (1810) notes, Flavel's ministerial success at Dartmouth is well exemplified in the comments of one of his hearers who wrote of him:

I could say much, though not enough, of the excellency of his preaching; of his seasonable, suitable and spiritual matter; of his plain expositions of scripture, his talking method, his genuine and natural deductions, his convincing arguments, his clear and powerful demonstrations, his heart searching applications, and his comfortable supports to those that were afflicted in conscience. In short that person must have a very soft head, or a very hard heart, or both, that could sit under his ministry unaffected.

The reader will also observe that, in addition to speaking well of Flavel himself, this testimonial also speaks quite favorably of its author as well. What a tremendous blessing it would be if all who sit under the sound preaching of God's word were as "tuned in" as this individual obviously was in making such astute observations about Flavel's preaching.

In addition to Flavel's undeniable preaching prowess, he was also extremely well-read with regard to the various religious controversies of his day (e.g., between Jews and Christians, Catholics and Protestants, Lutherans and Calvinists, etc.) and was considered to be in possession of an "excellent gift of prayer." As the author notes:

He always brought with him a broken heart and moving affections; his tongue and spirit were touched with a live coal from the altar, and he was evidently assisted by the Holy Spirit of grace and supplication in that divine ordinance. Those who lived in his family

say that he was always full and copious in prayer, seemed constantly to exceed himself, and rarely made use twice of the same expression.

This observation represents another very crucial point worthy of note by the contemporary Christian. Much of what passes for prayer today is little more than what Spurgeon often referred to mockingly as “pious effusion.” In a sermon entitled “Behold, He Prays” Spurgeon (1885) provided the following exhortation which remains applicable today:

If you prefer to compose your own prayers, you may do so throughout life and you may make prayers which shall be excellent in language. You may even make a new one every morning and every evening – and yet there may not have been a single atom of true supplication in the whole round of pious effusions! What if your first prayer has yet to be prayed? What a solemn suggestion to you who have been nursed in the lap of piety and wrapped in the garments of religion! I do not wonder that it cuts you to the quick. This heart-searching inquiry ought not to be thrust aside as if it did not concern you. Unless your heart speaks to God; unless your soul comes into spiritual contact with the great Father of Spirits, your form of prayer, whether it is liturgical or extemporaneous, is of little worth! God is not the God of the dead, but of the living – and this applies to prayers as well as men – “God abhors the sacrifice where not the heart is found.”

Prayers designed to impress the listener in the church are rarely if ever successful in communicating one’s heart to God. May God grant that all might pray with the reported earnestness of Flavel and not through mere vain repetition and “pious effusion.”

As nonconformists (dissenters from the established Anglican Church), Flavel and his congregation were subject to the restrictions imposed by the Act of Uniformity. Chief among these restrictions was the prohibition of their gathering as a church body. Undeterred by this dark

providence, Flavel began ministering the word and sacraments to his flock in private meetings. When the 1665 Oxford Act (also known as the Five Mile Act) banished all nonconformist ministers five miles from any town with a representative in Parliament, Flavel was forced to leave Dartmouth. Now residing in Slapton, a parish five miles from Dartmouth and out of the reach of those enforcing the Oxford Act, Flavel continued to preach twice every Lord's Day to many, including many from his former church in Dartmouth who came regularly to hear him. In addition to these public meetings, Flavel also returned to Dartmouth on occasion where he would hold clandestine meetings among the faithful there. It was during this time (1672) that Flavel lost his second wife. In response to this tremendous loss, he published *A Token for Mourners* (1674) in which he instructs the Christian concerning how to mourn appropriately. Flavel would later marry a third wife, Ann Downs, daughter of the minister of Exeter. This union, lasting eleven years, produced two sons.

When the persecution of the Nonconformists resumed, Flavel determined that it was both unsafe and unwise to continue his ministry in Dartmouth. Consequently, he moved to London where he assumed that he and his family would be in less danger, providing him more freedom to continue preaching the gospel. In preparation for the voyage from Dartmouth to London (which would have taken him along the southern coast via the English Channel), Flavel had a premonition during a dream. In this dream, he saw a man sitting next to a child in a cradle. When the child would not be quiet, the father gave him a lash with a whip saying, "Child, be quiet, I will discipline, but not hurt thee." When he awoke, Flavel concluded that the premonition was a warning that his journey would be perilous. Although his friends and traveling companions attempted to convince him otherwise, Flavel could not escape the thought that he and the others would be in danger.

When the ship on which Flavel was traveling was approximately five leagues<sup>1</sup> from the island of Portland, a tremendous storm commenced which threatened to sink the vessel. Flavel began to pray earnestly that God would spare all aboard, insisting that should they perish, the name of God would be blasphemed and the enemies of religion would argue that, while he may have escaped their grasp, Flavel was yet the victim of God's swift vengeance. Providentially, shortly after completing his prayer, the ship began to sail on calmer waters that led them safely to London. It was in London that Flavel, having lost his third wife, met and married his fourth (Dorothy), herself a widow and the daughter of Mr. George Jeffries, former minister of King's Bridge Church. Flavel continued to minister in a London Congregational church from 1682 to 1685.

During this particular time of ministry in London, Flavel narrowly avoided being arrested by the magisterial authorities. This narrow escape led Flavel and his family to return to Dartmouth where, shortly after his arrival, authorities placed him under house arrest. Undeterred by this seemingly minor inconvenience, Flavel continued to preach to the many former church members who visited him at home. Attempts were frequently made (namely by friend and ailing fellow pastor, Mr. Jenkins) to convince Flavel to return to the far more lucrative London where he might resume his ministry, but Flavel graciously refused, opting to continue his ministry to the faithful brethren in Dartmouth. Flavel's decision, at least in part, might very well have been based on the fact that the very man petitioning him to return to London was at the time dying in prison for his own illegal preaching activities.

In 1687, James II issued his Declaration of Indulgence. This declaration allowed Flavel to resume his public ministry which, despite his declining health, he carried out with great gusto.

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<sup>1</sup> A league is approximately 3.45 miles. Five leagues is approximately 17.25 miles (Source: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/333855/league>).

Facilitating his return to pastoral ministry, and significantly expanding the reach of his ministry, his loyal congregation erected a larger church building. Flavel preached his last sermon at Ashton on the twenty-first of June, 1691. His text was 1 Cor. 10:12, "Wherefore let him that standeth take heed lest he fall." Following this sermon, Flavel went to the town of Topsham, three miles from Exeter, where he presided as moderator in the assembly of the Nonconformist ministers of Devonshire who, by unanimous vote, made him chairman of the assembly. The purpose of this particular assembly was to forge an alliance between the Presbyterians and the Independents. Flavel's zealous arguments for this union won the day, and each of the ministers present declared their satisfaction concerning how the proceedings were carried out.

Not long after these proceedings, Flavel wrote a letter to a fellow minister in London and died that same day, June 26, 1691, at sixty-four years of age. Flavel's death came as a great surprise to all who knew him. In fact, those who had been with him on that day reported that he had appeared as well as he ever had. While finishing dinner that night, Flavel complained that one of his hands had gone numb and that he was having trouble lifting his head. A complete loss of speech soon followed and, shortly after having been taken upstairs, he passed away. Among the last words Flavel spoke, having acknowledged that he was near death, he remarked, "I know that it will be well with me."

Flavel is best known for his works of practical theology which are quite easily read even by the reader of modern English. These include his *Navigation Spiritualized* (1682), *A Token for Mourners* (1674), *The Method of Grace* (1681), and *Pneumatologia: A Treatise on the Soul of Man* (1685).



As impressive as Flavel's biography concerning his public preaching ministry truly is, an observation must also be made concerning his private devotional life. As recorded by Middleton (1810):

[Flavel] was not only a zealous preacher in the pulpit, but a sincere Christian in his closet, frequent in self-examination, as well as in pressing it upon others; being afraid, lest while he preached to others he himself should be a cast-away.

The author then shares a few selections from Flavel's diary to illustrate this important observation. In these entries, Flavel records his most intimate thoughts concerning, among other things, his primary motivation for the ministry. For example, he considered the assurance of salvation "the great business with which the sons of death have to do in this world." He wrote, in part:

Whether a man consider the immortality of his own soul, the ineffable joys and glory of heaven, the extreme and endless torments of hell, the inconceivable sweetness of peace of conscience, or the misery of being subject to the terrors thereof; all these put a necessity, a solemnity, a glory upon this work.

Flavel then enumerates the steps he intended to take in order to ensure that his ministry would be God-honoring and fruitful. These steps include his seeking the Holy Spirit who alone could manifest his own heart to him; his setting aside and casting out any self-love and hypocrisy; his keeping at the forefront of his mind and heart the judgment day with an end to be found faithful; a commitment to weighing everything he would say or write, with the help of the Lord, in order to evaluate his effectiveness; his intention to commit himself to his work only when his heart was found to be in "the most quiet and serious frame" and his commitment to distinguishing between those sins which should cause doubting and those which should serve to humiliate him.

If one were to use only three words to describe John Flavel in terms of what best characterized both his personal life and his pastoral ministry they would most certainly include “diligence,” “resilience,” and “piety.”

### **John Owen**

According to Beeke and Pederson (2006), John Owen is often referred to as the “prince of the English divines” and considered by many to be “a genius with learning second only to Calvin’s” (p. 455). Born in 1616 in Stadham, near Oxford, John was the second son of Henry Owen, the local Puritan vicar. According to Thomson (1853), little is actually known about Owen’s childhood “and no records whatever have descended to tell us of the mother to whom was committed the training of his most susceptible years.” At the age of twelve, however, the details of Owen’s life begin to emerge.

Showing a tremendous aptitude for learning early on, young John entered Queen’s College, Oxford at the age of twelve where he studied the classics, mathematics, philosophy, theology, Hebrew, and rabbinical writings. According to Cornish (2005), Owen received his B.A. at sixteen and his M.A. at nineteen. While it was fairly commonplace for the brightest young men of his day to enter college between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, Owen’s accomplishments remain unparalleled. By way of comparison, the thoughtful reader today must agree that the veritable gulf of disparity between education then and now renders any meaningful comparison between Owen and his contemporaries and the students of today impossible.

Tireless in his dedication to his studies, Owen was known to have spent up to twenty hours a day on his education despite its having taken a definitive toll on his health. According to his tutor, Thomas Barlow, “The boy-student devoted himself to the various branches of learning

with an intensity that would have unhinged most minds, and broken in pieces any bodily constitution except the most robust.”

Little is known concerning how Owen became interested in religion. The author suggests that perhaps his change of mind derived from “the dormant seeds of early instruction that had been lodged in his mind under the roof of the humble vicarage.” On the other hand, the author conjectures, it could very well be that the truths young Owen had “[stored] in his mind as a matter of mere intellectual furniture and accomplishment had unexpectedly reached his heart.” Perhaps it was “the earnest struggles on religious questions that were beginning to agitate the kingdom that had, in some measure, arrested the sympathy of the young recluse.” Whatever the actual catalyst was, according to Owen’s testimony in his later years at the university, the Holy Spirit began to “work in his soul a new class of thoughts and emotions.” Shortly thereafter, Owen committed his life to Christ.

In the midst of this momentous change in Owen’s spiritual life, it was not long before his newfound convictions would be put to the test with the ascension of William Laud to the position of Oxford’s chancellor. According to Lee (1892), Laud was considered by Puritan clergy and laity alike of being a formidable and dangerous opponent. These charges were corroborated by his subsequent imprisonment and execution for espousing Arminianism, opposing Calvinistic doctrine, and holding to certain Roman Catholic doctrines (p. 185). Thomson (1853) adds that Laud was “naturally arrogant,” possessed a “domineering spirit,” and was “narrow-minded, rough of temper, impatient of contradiction, and arbitrary.”

Laud’s changes to ecclesiastical polity posed considerable difficulty for Owen who, according to Thomson (1853), considered many of them, not only distasteful, but “divinely forbidden.” As unpleasant as these struggles were, however, they did serve to solidify Owen’s

resolve concerning the validity of what would later be referred to as the regulative principle of worship. As Owen remarked:

[Believers] will receive nothing, practice nothing, own nothing in His worship, but what is of His appointment. They know that from the foundation of the world he never did allow, nor ever will, that in any thing the will of the creatures should be the measure of his honor, or the principle of His worship, either as to matter or manner. It was a witty and true sense that one gave of the Second Commandment, '*Non imago, non simulachrum prohibetur, sed, non facies tibi;*' – it is a making to ourselves, an inventing, a finding out ways of worship, or means of honoring God, not by him appointed, that is so severely forbidden. Believers know what entertainment all will-worship finds with God. 'Who has required this at your hand?' and, 'In vain do ye worship me, teaching for doctrines the traditions of men,' is the best it meets with. I shall take leave to say what is upon my heart, and what (the Lord assisting) I shall willing endeavor to make good against all the world, - namely, that that principle, that the church has power to institute and appoint any thing or ceremony belonging to the worship of God, either as to matter or to manner, beyond the orderly observance of such circumstances as necessarily attend such ordinances as Christ himself has instituted, lies at the bottom of all the horrible superstition and idolatry, of all the confusion, blood, persecution, and wars, that have for so long a season spread themselves over the face of the Christian world; and that it is the design of a great part of the Book of the Revelation to make a discovery of this truth.

By way of contemporary observation, the church today would do well to return to the regulative principle of worship as a means of checking what amounts to an "anything goes" mentality in many congregations. As the ninety-sixth question of the Heidelberg Catechism

states in answer to the question regarding what God requires in the second commandment, “we are not to worship Him in any other way than He has commanded in His word.” Sadly, many today have deviated from this once revered standard insisting that worship should happen in a way that is more appealing to the people than pleasing to God. While this pragmatic approach may indeed present more attractive worship options to the unsuspecting masses, it nonetheless represents something else far more insidious. As MacArthur (1993) observed:

When pragmatism is used to make judgments about right and wrong, or when it becomes a guiding philosophy of life, theology, or ministry, it inevitably clashes with Scripture. Spiritual and biblical truth is not determined by what “works” and what doesn’t. We know from Scripture, for example, that the gospel often does not produce a positive response (1 Cor. 1:22-23; 2:14). On the other hand, Satanic lies and deception can be quite effective (Matt. 24:23-24; 2 Cor. 4:3-4). Majority reaction is no test of validity (cf. Matt. 7:13-14). Pragmatism as a guiding philosophy of ministry is inherently flawed. Pragmatism as a test of truth is nothing short of satanic. (p. 27)

As Thomson (1853) relates from Owen’s reflections on the matter, the church’s abandoning of the regulative principle of worship undoubtedly led to the prevalence of many of the same problems characteristic of the Church of Israel (cf. Ezek. 16:25) as prayer was derided, the preaching of the gospel was despised, the Sabbath day decried, and holiness was stigmatized and persecuted. Not surprisingly, these same things can also be observed in the pragmatic church of the twenty-first century.

In response to Laud’s unscriptural innovations at Oxford, Owen’s conscience dictated that he leave the university. As Thomson (1853) notes, “God was now educating him in a higher school than that of Oxford, and subjecting him to that fiery discipline by which he tempers and

fashions his most chosen instruments.” Not long after leaving Oxford, Owen was hired by Sir Philip Dormer of Ascot to serve as his family’s chaplain and as tutor to his oldest son. This assignment would be followed by other similar assignments until civil war broke out in England during the reign of Charles I. It was at this time that Owen found himself and his employer at the time, Lord Lovelace of Hurly, at opposing ends of the political spectrum. While Lovelace was loyal to the crown (which, incidentally, was beholden to William Laud and his ecclesiastical innovations), Owen remained loyal to the opposition, which resulted in his leaving Lovelace and returning to London. There, as Thomson (1853) relates, “he continued to suffer from that mental depression which had begun with his earliest religious anxieties at Oxford.” The extent of this suffering, the author maintains, can be seen in Owen’s *Exposition of the 130<sup>th</sup> Psalm*. In his prefatory note on this particular work, Goold (1981) shares significant insight into Owen’s state of mind at the time of its writing:

Dr. Owen himself, in a statement made to Mr. Richard Davis, who ultimately became pastor of a church in Rowel, Northamptonshire, explains the occasion which led him to a very careful examination of the fourth verse in the psalm (Ps. 130). (p. 324)

According to Goold (1981), Owen remarked to Davis that, having preached the gospel some years, it dawned on him that he had “but very little, if any, experimental acquaintance with access to God through Christ” (p. 324). Things soon changed dramatically for Owen who relates:

The Lord was pleased to visit me with sore affliction, whereby I was brought to the mouth of the grave, and under which my soul was oppressed with horror and darkness; but God graciously relieved my spirit by a powerful application of Psalm cxxx.4, ‘But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared;’ from whence I received

special instruction, peace, and comfort, in drawing near to God through the Mediator, and preached thereupon immediately after my recovery. (p. 324)

Owen was so comforted by Psalm 130:4 that, according to Goold (1981), “The exposition of [this single verse] constitutes nearly three-fourths of the whole treatise” (p. 324). Some, including Thomson (1853), have opined that this “mental autobiography” is to Owen what John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* was to him, an “unconscious transcript of his present wanderings, and perplexities, and final deliverances.”

Having recovered from a prolonged period of spiritual distress, Owen published his first book in March, 1642 entitled, *The Display of Arminianism*. Written largely in response to Laud and his associates, who were particularly zealous for Arminian theology, the work also served as a necessary corrective to the prevalence of Arminian thought among a substantial portion of the population. Thomson (1853) describes Arminianism’s popularity as:

The fashionable creed; a current of doctrine that had flowed into the church which was rapidly changing the character of its ministration, and bearing it away from those safe moorings at which its own articles and its Reformers had fixed it.

Owen’s book, as one might imagine, was met with emotions ranging from the hearty agreement of his fellow Calvinists to the abject horror of his Arminian opponents. As Thomson (1853) observed:

It is rich in matter which must have staggered the courtly theologians of the age, - it is hung all round with massive Calvinistic armour; and, though written in a more scholastic form than most of Owen’s subsequent works, gives indication of that spirit which was so characteristic of the Puritans, and preeminently of Owen, and which gave such a depth to

their piety, - the spirit which connected all events with God, and bent with lowly and awe-struck feeling before the divine sovereignty.

During this time (c. 1646-1650), which was reportedly the happiest and most productive period of his life, Owen would continue to write and publish many of his most well-known theological works. Among these are his *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* and *The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ Unfolded in Two Short Catechisms*. Not long after the publication of these works, in 1648, Owen published what is arguably one of his finest works in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, a treatise on the nature and extent of the death of Christ. Unlike most of Owen's works, which were researched and written within relatively short timeframes, Thomson (1853) notes that Owen had given this work to the world "after a more than seven-years serious inquiry, with a serious perusal of all that the wit of man, in former or latter days, had published in opposition to the truth." Thomson's (1853) further evaluation is also worthy of brief mention here:

The characteristic excellencies of Owen's mind shine out in this work with great lustre, - comprehension and elevation of view, which make him look at his subject in it various relations and dependencies, united with the most patiently minute examination of its individual parts, - intellectual strength, that delights to clear its way through impeding sophistries and snares, - sounds of judgment, often manifesting, even in his polemical writings, the presence and power of a heavenly spirit, and "expressing itself in such pithy and pregnant words of wisdom, that you both delight in the reading, and praise God for the writer." Owen does not merely touch his subject, but travels through it with the elephant's grave and solid step, if sometimes also with his ungainly motion; and more



than any other writer makes you feel, when he has reached the end of his subject, that he has also exhausted it.

In the midst of this wonderfully productive and relatively peaceful season of life, Owen was also faced with having to deal with certain events surrounding the English Civil Wars (1642-1651). During this tumultuous period, those loyal to Charles I and his successor, Charles II (called Royalists), waged war against the supporters of Parliament (sympathetic to the Puritan/Presbyterian cause). While a full treatment of this period is well beyond the scope of this present work, it must be noted that the conflict between Charles I and the Puritans arose, in large part, from the king's appointment of Owen's nemesis, William Laud, as the Archbishop of Canterbury. As discussed previously, Laud's "Romish" antagonism toward the Puritan/Presbyterian movement did not sit well with Owen, who had already suffered a considerable amount of the same under Laud's chancellorship of Oxford. Owen, therefore, availed himself of every opportunity to ensure that Charles I and William Laud would fail in their attempts at undoing many of the successful reforms that the Anglican church had made.

Owen's efforts did not go unrewarded. Suffering horrible defeat at the hands of Oliver Cromwell's Parliamentary forces, Charles I was tried for a litany of misdeeds against the realm and on January 30, 1649, was charged with high treason, tyrannical rule, and murder. He was subsequently beheaded at the Palace of Whitehall. Not long after these events, Owen was called to preach to Parliament. His sermon, based on Jeremiah 15:19, 20 ("I will make thee unto this people a fenced brazen wall; and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee to save thee, and to deliver thee, saith the Lord"), was entitled, *Righteous Zeal Encouraged by Divine Protection*.

While little is known concerning how Owen personally felt about the execution of Charles I, many feel as though the publication of his *Discourse on Toleration* (attached to his sermon to Parliament) was designed to provide a necessary balance to what may otherwise appear to be rather extreme sentiments. According to Thomson (1853):

The leading design of this essay is to vindicate the principle that errors in religion are not punishable by the civil magistrate, with the exception of such as in their own nature, not in some men's apprehensions, disturb the order of society.

While Owen's was not the first work aimed at eliminating the notion that religious error should be punished as a capital offense, his was among the more influential in promoting considerable religious freedom in England.

On April 19, 1649 Owen was again summoned to preach before Parliament. His sermon on this occasion, taken from Hebrews 12:27, was entitled, "On the Shaking of Heaven and Earth." According to Thomson (1853), on this day, "Oliver Cromwell was present, and probably for the first time heard Owen preach." Impressed with Owen's impassioned preaching, the following day, Cromwell approached him and reportedly said, "Sir, you are the person I must be acquainted with." Owen responded, "That will be much more to my advantage than yours." Cromwell then led Owen to a nearby garden where he made known to him his intention to depart for Ireland where the Civil War would continue to rage on. It was Cromwell's desire that Owen accompany him as chaplain to his men. Owen initially refused the offer because his church needed him, but Cromwell was not to be denied. As Thomson writes:

[Cromwell] even wrote to the church at Coggeshall urging their consent; and when they showed themselves even more averse to the separation of their pastor, Cromwell rose

from entreaties to commands; and Owen, with the advice of certain ministers who he consulted, was at length induced to make slow preparations for the voyage.

Despite Owen's initial reluctance to travel with Cromwell to Ireland, he eventually assumed his duties as commanded and, while serving as chaplain to Cromwell's men, he and Cromwell soon became fast friends. As Fraser (1973) observes:

Quite as much as Cromwell, [Owen] believed in military success as a healthy indication of divine favor. Not only did Cromwell's choice of Owen show the direction of his thinking was already taking on the subject of [the recapturing of] Ireland, but Owen's presence in itself and the close friendship he came to have with his master, must have had its effect in underlining this tendency in Cromwell's own mind. Owen later testified in the dedication of one of his books to "the daily spiritual refreshment and support" he had received from Cromwell, guided him into discovering "the deep and hidden dispensations of God towards his secret ones, which my spirit is taught to value." (p. 314)

Not only did Owen benefit from Cromwell's friendship and vice versa, as Thomson (1853) reports, Cromwell's men were also positively affected by their beloved chaplain's ministry:

No oath was heard throughout the whole camp, the twelve thousand soldiers spending their leisure hours in reading their Bibles, in the singing of psalms, and in religious conferences. Thus was trained that amazing armament, to whom victory seemed entailed... There were elements at work here that have seldom gone to the composition of armies.

Swiftly gaining the victory in Ireland, Cromwell returned to England where he was appointed General-in-chief of the armies of the Commonwealth. Owen, saddened by the fact that he could not do more for the Irish people in establishing much-needed churches there,

returned to his flock at Coggeshall. While there was no doubt much jubilation over his return, it was nonetheless short lived as, not long thereafter, Cromwell's services would be required in Scotland. As the chaplain, Owen was obliged to make the journey with him. Little is actually known about Owen's work serving Cromwell in Scotland apart from a record of his having preached in Berwick on Isaiah 56:7, "For mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people."

Following his victory in Scotland (which returned the country to the control of the Commonwealth), Cromwell was appointed as Chancellor of Oxford. As for Owen, he had resettled in Essex where he had hoped to be reunited with his flock at Coggeshall for the remainder of his days. This hope was not to be realized as on March 18, 1651, Owen was called to serve as Dean of Christ Church. This assignment was also to be very brief as, on September 9, 1652, Cromwell nominated Owen to serve as vice-chancellor of the same university he had left, heartbroken, so many years before.

Accepting his office as vice-chancellor was not an easy decision for Owen, who had been quite content resuming his pastorate in Coggeshall. Making matters worse was the fact that, as a result of nine years of Civil Wars and the resulting general unrest among the people of England, Oxford had only partially recovered in terms of regaining the wealth it had squandered in support of the king. As Thomson (1853) notes, many of the colleges had been closed, and their buildings converted into storage rooms for goods and artillery or barracks for soldiers. This turbulent time also had a profound effect on learning in general as students were required to set aside their learning of Latin, Greek, and the classics in favor of learning the fine art of modern warfare.

Owen's tenure as vice-chancellor of Oxford was very successful. As Thomson (1853) writes, "He succeeded, during the few years of his vice-chancellorship, in curing the worst evils of the University, and restoring it to such a condition of prosperity as to command at length even the reluctant praise of Clarendon<sup>2</sup>." Owen's success in the role of the vice-chancellor, while no doubt attributable, at least in part, to his astounding intellect, was also achieved by his excellent character. As Thomson (1853) relates, among other honorable facts, Owen allowed a society of Episcopalians to meet every Lord's Day in a space just outside his office. He did this even though it was in his power to forbid them. Owen also found good favor among many of the Presbyterians, some of whom were appointed by Owen to vacant positions within the university. Additionally, many poor yet promising students were provided financial assistance by Owen along with "that well-timed encouragement which is more gratifying than silver and gold." Foreign students were also helped tremendously as, for the first time, they were permitted to use the university's libraries and common areas.

One should not mistake these examples of generosity and good will for weakness. As Thomson (1853) is quick to point out, "Owen knew, by acts of wholesome severity, to put a curb upon licentiousness, and to invigorate the whole discipline of the university." For example, on one occasion, Owen warned one of the students of Trinity College who had stood to speak as *Terrae Filius*<sup>3</sup> that, while he was free to say anything he wanted, he was to abstain from any and all profane or obscene expressions and personal reflections. As Thomson (1853) observed, "The student began, but soon violated all the conditions that had been laid down to him." Owen repeatedly warned the young man to stop but he persisted. Wishing to reestablish his standards

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<sup>2</sup> A reference to Edward Hyde, first Earl of Clarendon and English statesman (Source: <http://bcw-project.org/biography/sir-edward-hyde>).

<sup>3</sup> Literally, son of the earth; a reference to a student formally appointed to deliver a satirical oration (Source: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/terrae%20filius>).

for conduct at the University, Owen had the man arrested and placed into Bocardo, the university's prison. This action achieved its desired effect and further solidified Owen's high standards for conduct in the minds of the students.

Beyond his desire to reestablish law and order among the students, Owen also had a loftier goal in mind. As Thomson notes:

The aims of the vice-chancellor rose far above the mere attempt to restrain licentiousness within moderate bounds; - his whole arrangements were made with the anxious desire of awakening and fostering among the students the power of a living piety.

In short, Owen longed to see to it that Oxford University was a place where not only the intellect could be well nourished but the spirit as well. As Thomson (1853) writes, "There are not wanting individual facts to show with what earnestness he watched and labored for the religious well-being of the university."

The author also points out that as demanding as Owen's position at Oxford was, his duties did not in any way consume all of his energies. He writes, "His mind appears to have expanded with his position, and to have shown resources that were literally inexhaustible." During this time, Cromwell often called upon Owen to attend various councils "in which he gave to the world theological works which would have been sufficient of themselves in the case of most men, to occupy and to recompense the energies of a lifetime."

Beyond his duties as vice-chancellor of Oxford, Owen also led a very robust life in the private sector, namely, through the ample public discourse generated by his writings. In addition to his writings, however, there is one particular event of interest in Owen's public life that warrants special mention. Not long after Cromwell dissolved the Long Parliament at the end of 1653, he issued writs for a new election. Under the new government, Oxford University was

empowered to return one member to Parliament. They subsequently chose Owen for the post and he held the position until, according to Thomson (1853), the committee of privileges annulled his election “on account of his being a minister of religion.” Not surprisingly, Owen had his fair share of detractors, so it was not long before they began to speak ill of him for being desirous of civil power. Thomson (1853) writes about two of Owen’s detractors in particular who carried their bias against him to a higher level:

Cawdrey and Anthony Wood, not satisfied with commenting on the fact of his seeming eagerness to grasp at civil power, accuse him, on the authority of public rumor, of refusing to say whether he was a minister or not, - a charge which he left at first to be answered by its own absurdity, but which, on finding some actually crediting it, he repelled with a pardonable amount of vehement indignation, declaring it to be “so remote from anything to give a pretence or color to it, that I question whether Satan have impudence enough to own himself as its author.

There were others of course who, while not nearly as vehemently opposed to Owen’s alleged deception, nevertheless questioned whether (or why) someone in Owen’s circumstances should be so eager to “[entangle] himself with the affairs of this life.” Even Thomson (1853) himself sees this as a far more tenable ground of objection. It is simply unimaginable how one of such notable accomplishment as Owen could choose public political life over “the duties of a tranquil pastorate.” As the author relates, however, times of emergency may arise at any time “when even the church minister may, for the sake of accomplishing the highest amount of good, places in abeyance the peculiar duties of his office and merge as a legislator.” This contingency is something that has happened even here in the United States on occasion. As Thomson (1853) relates:

Dr. Witherspoon, one of the purest and most conscientious of Scottish ecclesiastics, after emigrating to America, united the duties of pastor and president of Jersey College with those of a member of Congress, and was second only to Washington and Franklin in laying the foundations of the infant republic.

Owen was no doubt acting in a manner similar to Witherspoon and perhaps even had honorable ulterior motives involving the “well-being of the university, and for promoting the interests of religion and of religious liberty.”

When Cromwell introduced his “Instrument of Government” to Parliament (which proposed protection for all who professed faith in God by Jesus Christ), a considerable debate ensued. Most of the debate concerned the question of what fundamentals of Christian doctrine were to be believed to merit one’s protection by the government. To address this question, a fourteen-member committee comprised of the country’s most eminent divines was formed and given the task of re-wording the document. Owen was on this committee and, according to Baxter “had the principle share in wording the articles.” Once again, Owen’s involvement in the affairs of state was not without controversy as, according to Thomson (1853), he was soon accused of “seeking to limit the blessings of toleration, on the now generally admitted principle, that a man’s religious belief ought not to be made the condition of his civil privileges.” This accusation, however, was without merit because Owen’s work was limited exclusively to the document’s correctness regardless of what Parliament might make of the contents. As it turned out, the work of the council was for naught as, later that same year, Parliament adjourned, and nothing more was ever done with the measure.

About this time, Owen was invited by Cromwell and his council to head a committee that would handle enacting religious reforms that would reap tremendous permanent benefits. This



committee bore the responsibility both for examining candidates for ordaining and ejecting any ministers or schoolmasters who taught heretical doctrine or lived scandalous lives. This council was effective, but it was by no means perfect. According to Thomson (1853), Richard Baxter gave a hearty commendation of the council's labors saying, "There has not been such a service to England since the Christian religion was perfect in England! I dare be bold and say it." Despite this glowing testimony, however, many believed that the council was far too severe against Arminians and were sometimes "too particular in inquiring after evidences of sanctification in those whom they examined." At the same time, Thomson (1853) notes, they were sometimes "lax in the admitting of unlearned and erroneous men that favored Antinomianism or Anabaptism." In the final analysis, the author commends the council for doing the church a very beneficial service overall. He writes:

They saved many a congregation from ignorant, ungodly, drunken teachers, - that sort of men who intend no more in the ministry than to read a sermon on Sunday, and all the rest of the week go with the people to the alehouse and harden them in sin; and that sort of ministers who either preached against a holy life, or preached as men who were never acquainted with it. These they usually rejected, and in their stead admitted of any that were able, serious preachers, and lived a godly life, of what tolerable opinion soever they were; so that, though many of them were a little partial for the Independents, Separatists, Fifth-monarchy Men, and Anabaptists, and against the Prelatists and Arminians, yet so great was the benefit above the hurt which they brought to the church, that many thousands of souls blessed God for the faithful ministers whom they let in, and grieved when the Prelatists afterwards cast them out again.

When not called to perform various duties of the State, Owen's days were spent largely both in writing and in service to his beloved Oxford. Owen's contributions in returning the post-war university to its former stature are especially noteworthy. As Thomson (1853) remarks:

Few things, indeed, are more interesting than to look into the records of Oxford at this period...and to mark the constellation of great names among its fellows and students; some of whom were already in the height of their renown, and others, with a strangely varied destiny awaiting them, were brightening into a fame which was to shed its lustre on the coming age.

Indeed, even the most casual retrospective glance at the list of students during this time reveals a veritable who's who of future visionaries: Thomas Goodwin, president of Magdalen College; Stephen Charnock, author of *The Existence and Attributes of God*; Robert Boyle, philosopher, chemist, physicist, and inventor; Christopher Wren, one of England's most highly acclaimed architects; William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania; John Locke, regarded by many as the "Father of classical liberalism"; and Joseph Alleine, theologian and author of the now classic *Alarm to the Unconverted*.

Owen's successful vice-chancellorship at Oxford came to a speedy end when he fell out of favor with Cromwell. Parliament had introduced a proposal that would have made Cromwell king and Owen, fearing that such a measure (unopposed by Cromwell) was evidence of "the workings of an ambition which, if not checked, would introduce a new tyranny, and place in jeopardy those liberties which so much had been done and suffered to secure." Owen himself drafted the petition that eventually defeated the measure, thus securing once and for all his estrangement from his former master. Further evidence of the rift between Owen and Cromwell appears in what immediately followed. Soon after his being rejected for coronation, Cromwell

was inaugurated as Protector at Westminster Hall in a ceremony containing “the pomp and splendor of a coronation.” One would assume that Owen would have been front and center for such an occasion and yet, as Thomson (1853) notes, “he was not even there as an invited guest.” Shortly after his inauguration, Cromwell resigned from his post as Chancellor of Oxford and six weeks later Owen was displaced as well.

What was perhaps most remarkable about Owen’s departure from Oxford was his demeanor. As Thomson (1853) observes:

He ‘knew both how to abound, and how to be abased.’ There is no undignified insinuation of ungracious usage; no loud assertion of indifference, to cover the bitterness of chagrin; no mock humility; but a many reference to the service which he was conscious of having rendered to the university, with a generous appreciation of the excellencies of the friend to whom the government was not to be transferred.

As Thomson (1853) conjectured, had Owen been spared “the endless avocations of public life, and allowed to devote himself almost entirely to authorship,” he could have added much more to the genre of theological literature. Be that as it may, Owen still managed to publish more than ninety separate works consisting of tracts, treatises, individual books, and multi-volume collections of both doctrinally astute and intensely practical information. Conversely, one could also argue that it was Owen’s involvement in the affairs of society which enabled him to write so effectively. Conjecture aside, one thing simply cannot be denied. As Thomson (1853) states, “To the end of his days [Owen displayed] an almost miraculous fertility of authorship, that is only equaled by that of his illustrious compeer, Richard Baxter.”

While Owen continued to write during his retirement years, his life was certainly not one of luxury. In fact, by some estimates, Owen’s retirement years were among the most

turbulent of his life as those of Puritan persuasion once found themselves embroiled in a period of intense persecution in England. According to Beeke and Pederson (2006), in 1665, Owen himself, having been “indicted for holding religious conventicles in his home” (p. 459) was nearly arrested at the home of a close acquaintance but, providentially, he managed to slip out of the house unnoticed by the authorities. Praying that this period of renewed persecution might end so that he could resume his ministry, it wasn’t long before the answer came, albeit in a tragic way. From September 2 to September 5, 1666, the Great Fire of London swept through the medieval city and, according to Tinniswood (2003), consumed “13,200 houses, 87 parish churches, St. Paul’s Cathedral and most of the buildings of the City authorities. It is estimated that the fire destroyed the homes of 70,000 of the city’s 80,000 inhabitants” (p. 22). As a result of the ensuing chaos and unrest that followed this tragedy, the period of renewed intolerance against the Puritans was temporarily put on hold and Owen was able to resume his ministry in London.

Owen would continue to preach and to write for the next eight years. It was during this time that he wrote what many consider to be his greatest work, his *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* – a work that, according to Thomson (1853), “would be superfluous to describe or praise – For more than twenty years his thoughts had been turned to the preparing of this colossal commentary on the most difficult of all the Pauline epistles.” As an aside, it is interesting to note that, in spite of the centuries-old mystery surrounding Hebrews’ actual authorship, Thomson (1853) seemingly has little problem ascribing the epistle to Paul. It was also in 1674 that Owen published his *Pneumatologia*, considered to be one of the greatest treatises ever published on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

Despite his enjoying one of the most productive periods of his life, it wasn't long before Owen began to slow down considerably. According to Beeke and Pederson (2006), Owen "suffered much from asthma and gallstones in his last years, both of which often kept him from preaching" (p. 460). As Thomson (1853) relates, "Asthma inflicted him with such severity as often to unfit him for preaching; and stone, the frequent and agonizing disease of studious men in those times, gave no uncertain signs of its presence." Despite these difficulties, Owen did, however, according to Beeke and Pederson (2006), continue to write "producing major works on justification, spiritual-mindedness, and the glory of Christ" (p. 460).

Owen's final theological work was his *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*. As Thomson (1853) notes, "It embodies the holy musings of his latest days, and in many parts of it seems to echo the presses of the heavenly worshippers." According to Beeke and Pederson (2006), as the first sheets of this final work went to press, Owen remarked to William Payne (the minister who had arrived to tell him the good news):

"I am glad to hear it; but, oh brother Payne, the long wished for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done, or was capable of doing, in this world." (p. 460)

Shortly thereafter, on August 24, 1683, Owen crossed over the narrow way and entered his eternal rest. Curiously, only one day before, with great clarity of thought and no small amount of prescience, Owen had written to a friend:

I am going to Him whom my soul has loved, or rather who has loved me with an everlasting love – which is the whole ground of my consolation... I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm; but whilst the great Pilot is in it, the loss of a poor under-rower

will be inconsiderable. Live, and pray, and hope, and wait patiently, and do not despond; the promise stands invincible, that He will never leave us, nor forsake us.

### **Thomas Boston**

To assist the reader with understanding the potentially confusing structure of what follows, this work, entitled *Memoirs of the Life, Time, and Writings of the Reverend and Learned Thomas Boston, M.A.*, is divided into three parts. First, in the introduction to this work, the author (obviously not Boston himself) provides the reader with a high-altitude survey of Boston's life. This survey is followed by the section headed, *The Author's Address to His Children*, a letter written by Boston to his children on October, 1730, in which he explains to them how his memoirs came to be. The final section in this work is headed, *Memoirs of the Life, Time, and Writings of Mr. Thomas Boston*, in which the author expounds on his life's story, breaking it up into twelve separate sections, each reflective of the periods of his life from birth to near the time of his death. Given that Boston provides an exhaustive account of his life in his memoirs, in order to avoid redundancy, the introductory portion of this work (which, incidentally, does not appear in many of the available published forms) will not herein be addressed except, in postscript form, concerning his passing.

Boston (1730) begins his Memoirs with an address to his children (John, Jane, Alison, and Thomas) containing many explanatory notes for his work. He begins by telling them that his desire was that, at some point, they might wish to "know of [their] father's manner of life, beyond what [they] saw with [their] eyes." To that end, he informs them that he has written to manuscripts. The first manuscript is a "bound book in quarto"<sup>4</sup> entitled, "Passages of my Life"

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<sup>4</sup> "Quarto" is a reference to the book's size, which, in this case, would have been approximately 9.5" X 12" (Source: <http://www.trussel.com/books/booksize.htm>).

and contains Boston's favorite Bible passages. The second manuscript, consisting of 279 written pages, covers Boston's life from his birth to October 24, 1730.

The author then tells his children that, while they would not discover that they are descended from nobility (at least, not in the world's estimation), they would find themselves "children of the covenant, devoted unto the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" should they make personal acceptance of the covenant and cleave to Him as their God. This covenant relationship would prove to be "a matter of eternal value and significance before the Lord" and "of value to [them] in this and the other world."

Finally, Boston (1730) warns his children that they are living in a "sinning time," beyond the days of his fathers, beseeching them to regard their eternal welfare and "save [themselves] from this untoward generation" and to "see the absolute necessity of regeneration, the change of [their] nature, by union with Jesus Christ the second Adam; as it was corrupted by the means of [their] relation to the first Adam fallen." This admonition is especially noteworthy as a means of explaining the Presbyterian view of so-called "covenant children." Contrary to what many outside of Presbyterianism often contend, Presbyterians do not consider their children to be in a saving relationship with God. By "covenant children" is only meant that they have been blessed to have been born of believing parents. Personal faith in Christ, by God's grace, is still necessary for their personal ratification of God's covenant.

In the Memoirs portion of this work, Boston (1730) begins, as they say, at the beginning, relating, first of all, that he was born on March 17, 1676 in Duns, Berwickshire, Scotland. According to Beeke and Pederson (2006), Boston was the youngest of seven children born to John Boston and Alison Trotter. The elder Boston, "was a cooper<sup>5</sup> by trade and a strict Presbyterian" (p. 653) who taught his children from an early age the importance of pursuing

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<sup>5</sup> A barrel-maker.

holiness above all else. John Boston was also a staunch advocate of education. In fact, the local schoolmistress lived in the Boston home and held classes in its upper rooms. As Boston (1730) recollected, he was “kindly treated by her” and she “often expressed her hope of seeing [him] in the pulpit.”

By the age of seven, Boston was reading the Bible frequently, even taking it to bed with him on occasion. Although his Bible reading was, at this time, more the byproduct of curiosity than anything else, in retrospect, Boston was nevertheless thankful that the Lord had given him the desire to read the Scriptures at such an early age.

Unlike most prepubescent boys, Boston (1730) reports that “by means of [his] education, and natural disposition, [he] was of a sober and harmless deportment” never being “so addicted to play as to forget [his] business.” Even at such an early age, it seems as though he was being prepared for the serious business of preaching. This preparation is also reflected in the punctuality of Boston’s church attendance even while yet unredeemed. As he recalls:

During the first years of my being at grammar school, I kept the kirk punctually, where I heard those of the Episcopal way; that being the national establishment: but I knew nothing of the matter, save to give suit and presence within the walls of the house; living without God in the world, unconcerned about the safety of my soul, till the year 1687.

It was while with his father at a meeting of the Presbyterian church in Newton of Witsome that young Thomas, now eleven years old, was quickened unto newness of life under the preaching of Henry Erskine. Erskine preached from two texts that day: John 1:29, “Behold the Lamb of God...”, and Matthew 3:7, “O generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee...” As Boston (1730) recollected, “By these, I judge, God spoke to me; however, I know I was touched quickly after the first hearing, wherein I was like one amazed with some new and strange thing.” From



that day forward, Boston determined never to return to church as long as it remained under Episcopal control. When religious tolerance was expanded under King James, however, he started attending the Presbyterian church and remained a dedicated Presbyterian for the rest of his life.

By the age of thirteen, which marked the end of his grammar school days, Boston had become quite adept, not only in the rudimentary studies of reading, writing, and arithmetic but also in Latin, English Rhetoric and Greek. Comparing the quality and depth of education in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to education today, one marvels at the mastery that Boston and his contemporaries were able to achieve in subjects that most students today could not even imagine having to undertake.

Boston completed grammar school in 1689, however, due to severe financial hardship, two years would pass before now fifteen-year-old Boston was able to enter college. Compounding matters further, at this same time Boston's mother lay dying and his father was also critically ill. Helpless to do anything that might ease their suffering, Boston began to pray fervently for strength as well as for his father's healing. The Lord soon answered his petitions and, shortly thereafter, his father, having recovered both physically and financially, agreed that Boston should resume his education. On October 15, 1691, at a cost of four dollars (the annual tuition at the time), Boston enrolled into college under the tutelage of one Mr. Herbert Kennedy.

Boston's first couple of years in college were quite difficult. Feeling "dejected and melancholy," he rarely left his room except to attend classes. This dejection and melancholy soon progressed into a general failing of Boston's health as evidenced by recurring fainting spells. Given the frugality with which he was forced to live, it is altogether probable that Boston

was suffering from malnutrition bordering on starvation. This diagnosis is evidenced by his recovery the following year and his admission to “a diet managed more liberally.”

The entire cost of Boston’s college education was £128, 15 shillings, eight doyt Scots.<sup>6</sup> By the time of his laureation (graduation), Boston had acquired extensive knowledge of “the logics, metaphysics, ethics, and general physics.” Despite this rather impressive resume, however, it is interesting to note that Boston considered his having learned shorthand from an acquaintance to be of equal value to everything else he had learned. It was his hope that he would put it to use in the writing of his sermons. When he found that he made little use of it for that purpose, he found that it was much more useful in his personal record keeping and for writing things that he wished to keep secret.

Immediately following his graduation from college, Boston was recruited by the presbyteries in both Duns and Churnside. It was with their assistance that Boston began to study theology in earnest. Soon after, in January, 1695, he went to Edinburgh to attend the school of divinity taught by Mr. George Campbell. He stayed at the school until the end of April when he “returned home, clothed with testimonials from Professor Campbell, bearing that [he] had diligently attended the profession, dexterously acquitted [himself] in several essays prescribed to [him], behaved inoffensively, gravely, and piously.”

Boston’s journey to licensure as a gospel minister was not nearly as straightforward as the process is in most churches today. In addition to attending divinity school, candidates in seventeenth century Presbyterian Scotland were often required first to serve as chaplains to the various notable families in the parish. One’s duties as a family chaplain often involved teaching the children of the household their rudimentary subjects (e.g., reading, writing, arithmetic, and

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<sup>6</sup> A “doyt” was a Scottish penny; a shiling was equal to twelve doyt; a pound was equal to twenty shillings or 240 doyt (Source: <http://www.johngraycentre.org/about/archives/old-scottish-money-research-guide-7/>)

Latin). The family chaplain was also tasked with conducting Bible study and devotions within the home. Having performed satisfactorily in this regard, upon the recommendation of one's tutor, he could then apply for trials.<sup>7</sup> Boston spent a considerable length of time attempting to secure trials from the local presbytery. Finally, on March 23, 1697, the presbytery heard his pleas and appointed him a trial on James 1:5 which he delivered at their next meeting in Duns.

On April 2, 1697, Boston preached his sermon as instructed and "was helped of God therein accordingly." The presbytery then assigned him another trial which he delivered, in Latin, at Churnside on May 11, 1697. On June 15, 1697, Boston was brought before the Presbytery and was presented with the remainder of his trials, as well as proficiency examinations in language and catechetics. Later that day, having met all of the requirements, Boston was licensed to preach the gospel.

Boston spent the next two years and three months in a probationary status. This period was one of the most trying of Boston's life. As he commenced his work as a young minister, Boston records that at one point he "lay groveling on the ground for some time in great perplexity, wishing [he] had never undertaken that work." In response, he began to pray. Shortly thereafter, Boston reported, "it came so easily to hand, that I saw the finger of God in it."

One of the more interesting things about Boston's early ministry is that, as he began to prepare and to preach each week, he found himself more inclined to preach on the topic of sin than anything else. For example, the first text he preached from after being licensed was Psalm 50:20, "You sit and speak against your brother; You slander your own mother's son." The next text he preached from was Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will

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<sup>7</sup> Trials were attempts at proving oneself fit for the ministry, generally through a demonstration of one's proficiency in the pulpit.

enter.” Boston continued preaching these texts for two months until one Mr. John Dysert, minister at Coldinghame, said to him, “. . .if you were entered on preaching of Christ, you would find it very pleasant.” This advice did in fact change the direction of Boston’s preaching and made such an impact on him that he would later testify, “I have often, since that time, remembered that word of Mr. Dysert’s, as the first hint given me, by the good hand of my God, towards the doctrine of the gospel.”

Having ministered faithfully in Churnside, Duns, Kelso, and Foulden, Boston was invited to serve the presbytery of Kelso. He was advised, however, to wait until the following presbyteryday<sup>8</sup> so, in the interim, he preached at Foulden. During this time, another man had been selected to serve at Kelso and, having set aside any further thoughts of going there, on April 17, 1698, Boston resolved to go to Stirling. While at Stirling, Boston continued to minister in local churches to grateful gatherings. While he could have settled in any one of the seven churches in which he routinely ministered, according to Beeke and Pederson (2006), “the landlord intervened to prevent it”<sup>9</sup> (p. 654).

In 1699, Boston began what would be a season of considerable difficulty at Simprin. Having been called by the landlord to minister there, Boston faced continual challenges, not only concerning matters of health (Boston had a long history of recurring fainting spells) but from his congregation as well. Having ministered in relatively lucrative areas to biblically astute congregations, nothing could have prepared Boston for what he discovered in Simprin. Simprin was the smallest parish in Berwickshire and thus received very little interest from the Duns presbytery. Evidence of a disinterested and uninvolved presbytery is most readily apparent considering that, upon Boston’s arrival, he found the people of Simprin to be spiritually

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<sup>8</sup> The next meeting of the presbytery.

<sup>9</sup> Landlords wielded tremendous power in feudal Scotland (which lasted until c. 1740).

malnourished and doctrinally anemic. According to Beeke and Pederson (2006), “Boston was dismayed to learn that only one household observed family worship. What’s more, the Lord’s Supper had not been administered for several years” (p. 655). Boston worked very hard to turn things around in Simprin and, providentially, his labors were not in vain. In a single year, the parish church at Simprin was worshipping twice every Lord’s Day and growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Looking back on those difficult days, Boston would write in his memoirs:

I think God sent all this to shake me out of myself, to strike at the root of my corruption with respect to my settlement, and to make me glad to creep into Simprin. I am sure God gave me in Simprin most of the things recorded, and though I am now, at the writing hereof, removed from it, I will ever remember it as a field which the Lord blessed.

The key to Boston’s successful ministry at Simprin was undoubtedly his dedication to and fervency in prayer. Recognizing that, in and of himself, he had nothing with which to turn the tide of ignorance and disinterest among the people, Boston routinely committed himself and his ministry to the One who alone could ensure gospel success. Among the many references to prayer in Boston’s memoirs, the following entry is exemplary:

Meditating on what is before me, I saw much of the weight of the work; wherefore I went to God mourning, and poured out my soul to Him. I saw it a great matter to have the charge of souls, and to be faithful. Two things were mainly before me: the difficulty to carry right in the ministry in general; which was heightened from the consideration of the present state of affairs, and an impression I had of matters turning worse: and then the difficulty of carrying right to the poor parish to which I am called. These made my heart almost to sink: and indeed my heart and flesh did faint and fail; but that word, "He shall

feed His flock," did bear me up. When I went to prayer again, I had more confidence and courage; and when I came away, that word came, Heb. 10:35, "Cast not away your confidence," etc... Having spent the time in prayer, meditation, and reading, till the night was well far on, and remembering how Satan is sure to lay wait for me in a special manner before some great work that I have to do, I committed soul, body, and spirit, to the Lord, and so went on with spiritual thoughts.

All ministers would do well to pray similarly, asking the Lord to do that which only He is capable of doing in the building up of His church and the equipping of His saints to continue the work of the gospel ministry. That the Lord blessed the prayers of Boston can be seen clearly in what the Simprin parish would become. As Beeke and Pederson (2006) observed, "Boston's congregation outgrew its church building, especially on Communion Sabbaths. After seven years, not a single family neglected family worship" (p. 656).

On Wednesday, July 17, 1700, at twenty-five years of age, Boston married Katharine Brown, two years his senior. Nearly one year later, on April 10, 1701, Boston's father died at the age of seventy. Providentially, Boston's grief would be tempered by the arrival of his first child, a daughter, Katharine, on May 24, 1701. Sickly from birth (she was born with a double cleft palate and was unable to nurse effectively), young Katharine required constant supervision which quickly solidified her relationship with her busy father who would later recall, "In that dear child's case, I had a singular experience of tender love melted down in pity; as considering her teeth set on edge through the parent's eating of the sour grape."

While returning from attending his father's funeral, Boston's wife fell ill, likely from food poisoning after having eaten some mutton the night before. As she slept, she had a dream that their young daughter was well and whole. This dream prompted the couple to return home as

quickly as possible. When they were only eight or nine miles from home, word was sent to them that their daughter had died and had been buried. Within only a few short months, Boston had lost both his father and his precious daughter. As Boston noted, “It was one affliction on the neck of another.” The Bostons would eventually have nine other children but, sadly, they would end up losing five more of them.

On May 1, 1707, at thirty-two years of age, Boston assumed the pastorate at Ettrick where he would spend the remainder of his life. According to Beeke and Pederson:

The poor spiritual condition of people there overcame Boston’s reluctance to leave Simprin. Ettrick had less than four hundred people. The roads were nearly impassible. The parsonage was dilapidated. Church services were irregular. Spiritual barrenness, pride, deceit, swearing, and fornication abounded.

Unlike tiny Simprin, the parish of Ettrick was vast. Situated in Selkirkshire, the parish covered approximately one hundred square miles. Given the increased size and scope of his ministry there, even after eight years in the parish, Boston said to his wife, “My heart is alienated from this place.” This dissatisfaction is evidenced by the fact that Boston refused to serve communion in Ettrick for three years and, even then, only fifty-seven individuals participated.

Two years later, having ministered in Ettrick for ten prayerful years, Boston began to see the same improvements that he had seen in Simprin. Attitudes toward worship began to change, and Boston soon found himself preaching to an increasingly large crowd each Lord’s Day, many of whom would travel long distances to hear him. With the publication and distribution of his sermons, Boston was also able to gain a considerable following from as far away as Edinburgh. Further evidence of God’s favor upon the church at Ettrick can be seen in the drastic increase of

communicants in Boston's last communion service offered in 1731. On this occasion, "the tokens distributed numbered 777."

From 1717 to 1723, the majority of Boston's time was spent dealing with what has been labeled "The Marrow Controversy." This controversy derives its name from a book entitled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, written in 1645 by Edward Fisher and reprinted in 1718 by James Hog, minister of Carnock. In 1720, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland forbade ministers from recommending this book or advocating its use. This prohibition, of course, resulted in no small controversy between those who happened to agree with Fisher's work and those who did not.

This controversy led to the formation of two predominant schools of thought and considerable opposition between two groups of theologians: the "Marrow Men" and the "Neonomians." At issue in this particular controversy was the doctrinal statement put forth in 1717 by the presbytery of Auchterarder. At this meeting, one William Craig refused to affirm the following statement: "It is not sound and orthodox to teach that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ." According to those siding with Craig, man was indeed responsible for forsaking his sin to come to Christ. Men like Boston (the Marrow Men), however, disagreed arguing that one simply cannot forsake his sin without having first experienced the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. In other words, before any man can forsake his sin or even has the first thought of doing so, he must be saved. The Neonomians, on the other hand, believed that repentance is a meritorious work that God rewards with salvation.

On a contemporary note, there are many today who do not hold to a Reformed soteriology and insist, like the Neonomians of Boston's day, that faith precedes regeneration. Whether they are willing to admit it or not, they too would be forced to conclude that man's



salvation is not dependent on the free and sovereign grace of God who dispenses it to whomever He wills, but on their own “meritorious” act of repenting and believing.

Boston and his fellow “Marrow Men” attempted an appeal to the General Assembly in 1721 with their publication of *The Representation*, a paper arguing against condemning Fisher’s work. Their protestations were to no avail, however, and, in the following year (1722), the Marrow Controversy was resolved when leaders of the Assembly issued a formal rebuke to all who held an opinion contrary to the now established Neonomian position. Ministers were not, however, removed from their pulpits. Unfazed by the rebuke he had received from the Assembly, Boston remarked, “I received the rebuke and admonition as an ornament put upon me, being for the cause of truth.”

Boston’s life was not easy. As Beeke and Pederson note, “He lost his mother at age fifteen and his father a decade later.” His wife, Katharine Brown, in whom Boston saw “sparkles of grace,” was prone to “repeated bouts of depression and insanity. From 1720 on, she was often confined to an apartment, which she called ‘the inner prison.’” This condition was undoubtedly aggravated considerably as a result of the Boston’s having to bury six of their ten children. Boston himself was also not well for much of his life. As revealed in his memoirs, he often suffered from fainting spells, weakness in his limbs, anxiety, depression, disappointment, lack of confidence, and a host of other ailments.

In spite of his difficult life, however, Boston is revered as one of the greatest Puritan divines who ever lived. In fact, as Ryken (2009) notes, Jonathan Edwards once referred to him as “a truly great divine.” While much of his early life as a minister was spent moving from parish to parish, having to nurse most of them from the brink of ruin back to spiritual health and vitality, his years at Ettrick were quite profitable. It was from here that Boston did most of the writing for

which he is famous today. One of his most well-known works, *The Crook in the Lot*, was written only months before his death, a fact that is made more poignant when one considers the subtitle: *The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God in the Afflictions of Men, together with a Christian Deportment under Them*. In addition to this classic work, Boston left behind a rich written legacy spanning twelve volumes of collected writings which include his second most widely read volume, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*. As Beeke and Pederson (2006) relate, “John MacLeod wrote of it, ‘There is no book of practical divinity...which was more read in the godly homes of Scotland than this treatise. It did more to mold the thought of his countrymen than anything except the Westminster Shorter Catechism’” (p. 664).

Thomas Boston died on May 20, 1732, at the age of 56 years. One must marvel at how God’s providence so wonderfully sustained Boston through the various trials he faced during his relatively short life. At the same time, one must be grateful to God for the enduring example of men like Boston, who serve as fitting role models for today’s preachers and teachers of God’s word. The Puritan era may indeed be a distant memory in the mind of many in the church today, but her ministers would do well to devote themselves to a thorough study and examination of these ordinary men who were made great by the grace of God.

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