

Opposition Made Unto the Church as Built Upon the Person of Christ.

by John Owen

The opposition of the gates of hell unto the church is an ongoing struggle to separate the church from its foundation in Christ, and to undermine the faith of believers in the person of Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 16:18, John 10:28, Romans 8:31, 2 Corinthians 10:4, Ephesians 6:12, Colossians 2:8, 1 Timothy 6:12, Hebrews 12:3, 1 Peter 5:8, 1 John 4:4

Topics: "The Person of Christ", "Opposition to the Church"

Description

John Owen emphasizes the promise of Christ regarding the church's preservation and the inevitable opposition it faces from the forces of hell. He explains that this opposition manifests through both persecution from the world and heretical teachings that seek to undermine the faith in Christ's person and work. Owen highlights that the church, built upon the foundation of Christ, will endure despite these challenges, as the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. He calls believers to remain steadfast in their faith and to recognize the importance of Christ's dual nature as both God and man, which is essential for the church's foundation. Ultimately, Owen encourages the church to uphold its confession of Christ as the Son of the living God amidst the ongoing spiritual battles.

Transcript

There are in the words of our Saviour unto Peter concerning the foundation of the church, a promise of its preservation, and a prediction of the opposition that should be made thereunto. And, accordingly, all things are come to pass, and carrying on towards a complete accomplishment. For (that we may begin with the opposition foretold) the power and policy of hell ever were, and ever will be, engaged in opposition unto the church built on this foundation -- that is, the faith of it concerning his person, office, and grace, whereby it is built on him. This, as unto what is past, concerneth matter of fact, whereof, therefore, I must give a brief account; and then we shall examine what evidences we have of the same endeavour at present.

The gates of hell, as all agree, are the power and policy of it, or the actings of Satan, both as a lion and as a serpent, by rage and by subtlety. But whereas in these things he acts not visibly in his own person, but by his agents, he hath always had two sorts of them employed in his service. By the one he executes his rage, and by the other his craft; he animates the one as a lion, the other as a serpent. In the one he acts as the dragon, in the other as the beast that had two horns like the lamb, but spake like the dragon.

The first is the unbelieving world; the other, apostates and seducers of all sorts. Wherefore, this work is this kind is of a double nature; -- the one, an effect of his power and rage, acted by the world in persecution -- the other, of his policy and craft, acted by heretics in seduction. In both he designs to separate the church from its foundation.

The opposition of the first sort he began against the person of Christ immediately in his human nature. Fraud first he once attempted in his temptation, (Matt. iv.,) but quickly found that that way he could make no approach unto him. The prince of this world came, but had nothing in him. Wherefore he betook himself unto open force, and, by all means possible, sought his destruction. So also the more at any time the church is by faith and watchfulness secured against seduction, the more doth he rage against it in open persecution. And (for the example and comfort of the church in its conformity unto Christ) no means were left unattempted that might instigate and prepare the world for his ruin. Reproaches, contempt, scorn, false and lying accusations -- by his suggestions -- were heaped on him on every hand. Hereby, in the whole course of his ministry, he "endured the contradiction of sinners against himself:" Heb. xii. 3. And there is herein blessed provision made of inestimable consolation, for all those who are "predestinated to be conformed unto his image," when God shall help them by faith to make use of his example. He calls them to take up his cross and follow him; and he hath showed them what is in it, by his own bearing of it. Contempt, reproach, despiteful usage, calumnies, false accusations, wrestings of his words, blaspheming of his doctrine, reviling of his person, all that he said and did as to his principles about human government and moral conversation, encompassed him all his days. And he hath assured his followers, that such, and no other, (at least for the most part,) shall be their lot in this world. And some in all ages have an experience of it in an eminent manner. But have they any reason to complain? Why should the servant look for better measure than the Master met withal? To be made like unto him in the worst of evils, for his sake, is the best and most honourable condition in this world. God help some to believe it! Hereby was way made for his death. But, in the whole, it was manifested how infinitely, in all his subtlety and malice, Satan falls short of the contrivances of divine wisdom and power. For all that he attained by effecting his death, in the hour of darkness, was but the breaking of his own head, the destruction of his works, with the ruin of his kingdom; and what yet remains to consummate his eternal misery, he shall himself work out in his opposition unto the church. His restless malice and darkness will not suffer him to give over the pursuit of his rage, until nothing remains to give him a full entrance into endless torments -- which he hasteneth every day. For when he shall have filled up the measure of his sins, and of the sins of the world in being instrumental unto his rage, eternal judgment shall put all things unto their issue. Through that shall he, with the world, enter into everlasting flames -- and the whole church, built on the rock, into rest and glory.

No sooner did the Church of the New Testament begin to arise on this foundation, but the whole world of Jews and Gentiles set themselves with open force to destroy it. And all that they contended with the church about, was their faith and confession of it, that "Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God." This foundation they would cast it from, or exterminate it out of the earth. What were the endeavours of the gates of hell in this kind -- with what height of rage, with what bloody and inhuman cruelties they were exercised and executed -- we have some obscure remembrance, in the stories that remain from the martyrdom of Stephen unto the days of Constantine. But although there be enough remaining on record, to give us a view of the insatiable malice of the old murderer, and an astonishing representation of human nature degenerating into his image in the perpetration of all horrid, inhuman cruelties -- yet is it all as nothing in comparison of that prospect which the last day will give of them, when the earth shall disclose all the blood that it hath received, and the righteous Judge shall lay open all the contrivances for its

effusion, with the rage and malice wherewith they were attended. The same rage continueth yet unallayed in its principles. And although God in many places restrain and shut it up in his providence, by the circumstances of human affairs, yet -- as it hath the least advantage, as it finds any door open unto it -- it endeavours to act itself in lesser or higher degrees. But whatever dismal appearance of things there may be in the world, we need not fear the ruin of the church by the most bloody oppositions. Former experiences will give security against future events. It is built on the rock, and those gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

The second way whereby Satan attempted the same end, and yet continueth so to do, was by pernicious errors and heresies. For all the heresies wherewith the church was assaulted and pestered for some centuries of years, were oppositions unto their faith in the person of Christ. I shall briefly reflect on the heads of this opposition, because they are now, after a revolution of so many ages, lifting up themselves again, though under new vizards and pretences. And they were of three sorts:--

1. That which introduced other doctrines and notions of divine things, absolutely exclusive of the person and mediation of Christ. Such was that of the Gnostic, begun as it is supposed by Simon the magician. A sort of people they were, with whom the first churches, after the decease of the apostles, were exceedingly pestered, and the faith of many was overthrown. For instead of Christ and God in him reconciling the world unto himself, and the obedience of faith thereon according unto the Gospel, they introduced endless fables, genealogies, and conjugations of deities, or divine powers; which practically issued in this, that Christ was such an emanation of light and knowledge in them as made them perfect -- that is, it took away all differences of good and evil, and gave them liberty to do what they pleased, without sense of sin, or danger of punishment. This was the first way that Satan attempted the faith of the church, viz., by substituting a perfecting light and knowledge in the room of the person of Christ. And, for aught I know, it may be one of the last ways whereby he will endeavour the accomplishment of the same design. Nor had I made mention of these pernicious imaginations which have lain rotting in oblivion for so many generations, but that some again endeavour to revive them, at least so far as they were advanced and directed against the faith and knowledge of the person of Christ.

2. Satan attempted the same work by them who denied his divine nature -- that is, in effect, denied him to be the Son of the living God, on the faith whereof the church is built. And these were of two sorts:--

(1.) Such as plainly and openly denied him to have any pre-existence unto his conception and birth of the holy Virgin. Such were the Ebionites, Samosatarians, and Photinians. For they all affirmed him to be a mere man, and no more, though miraculously conceived and born of the Virgin, as some of them granted; (though denied, as it is said, by the Ebionites;) on which account he was called the Son of God. This attempt lay directly against the everlasting rock, and would have substituted sand in the room of it. For no better is the best of human nature to make a foundation for the church, if not united unto the divine. Many in those days followed those pernicious ways; yet the foundation of God stood sure, nor was the church moved from it. But yet, after a revolution of so many ages, is the same endeavour again engaged in. The old enemy, taking advantage of the prevalence of Atheism and profaneness among those that are called Christians, doth again employ the same engine to overthrow the faith of the church -- and that with more subtlety than formerly -- in the Socinians. For their faith, or rather unbelief, concerning the person of Christ, is the same with those before mentioned. And what a vain, wanton generation admire and applaud in their sophistical reasonings, is no more but what the primitive church triumphed over through faith, in the most subtle management of the Samosatarians, Photinians, and others. An evidence it is that Satan is not unknowing unto the workings of that vanity and darkness, of those corrupt affections in the minds of

men, whereby they are disposed unto a contempt of the mystery of the Gospel. Who would have thought that the old exploded pernicious errors of the Samosatians, Photinians, and Pelagians, against the power and grace of Christ, should enter on the world again with so much ostentation and triumph as they do at this day? But many men, so far as I can observe, are fallen into such a dislike of the Christ of God, that every thing concerning his person, Spirit, and grace, is an abomination unto them. It is not want of understanding to comprehend doctrines, but hatred unto the things themselves, whereby such persons are seduced. And there is nothing of this nature whereunto nature, as corrupted, doth not contribute its utmost assistance.

(2.) There were such as opposed his divine nature, under pretence of declaring it another way than the faith of the church did rest in. So was it with the Arians, in whom the gates of hell seemed once to be near a prevalency. For the whole professing world almost was once surprised into that heresy. In words they acknowledged his divine person; but added, as a limitation of that acknowledgment, that the divine nature which he had was originally created of God, and produced out of nothing; with a double blasphemy, denying him to be the true God, and making a god of a mere creature. But in all these attempts, the opposition of the gates of hell unto the church respected faith in the person of Christ as the Son of the living God.

(3.) By some his human nature was opposed -- for no stone did Satan leave unturned in the pursuit of his great design. And that which in all these things he aimed at, was the substitution of a false Christ in the room of Him who, in one person, was both the Son of man and the Son of the living God. And herein he infected the minds of men with endless imaginations. Some denied him to have any real human nature, but [alleged him] to have been a phantasm, an appearance, a dispensation, a mere cloud acted by divine power; some, that he was made of heavenly flesh, brought from above, and which (as some also affirmed) was a parcel of the divine nature. Some affirmed that his body was not animated, as ours are, by a rational soul, but was immediately acted by the power of the Divine Being, which was unto it in the room of a living soul; some, that his body was of an ethereal nature, and was at length turned into the sun; with many such diabolical delusions. And there yet want not attempts, in these days, of various sorts, to destroy the verity of his human nature; and I know not what some late fantastical opinions about the nature of glorified bodies may tend unto. The design of Satan, in all these pernicious imaginations, is to break the cognation and alliance between Christ in his human nature and the church, whereon the salvation of it doth absolutely depend.

3. He raised a vehement opposition against the hypostatical union, or the union of these two natures in one person. This he did in the Nestorian heresy, which greatly, and for a long time, pestered the church. The authors and promoters of this opinion granted the Lord Christ to have a divine nature, to be the Son of the living God. They also acknowledged the truth of his human nature, that he was truly a man, even as we are. But the personal union between these two natures they denied. A union, they said, there was between them, but such as consisted only in love, power, and care. God did, as they imagined, eminently and powerfully manifest himself in the man Christ Jesus -- had him in an especial regard and love, and did act in him more than in any other. But that the Son of God assumed our nature into personal subsistence with himself -- whereby whole Christ was one person, and all his mediatory acts were the acts of that one person, of him who was both God and man -- this they would not acknowledge. And this pernicious imagination, though it seem to make great concessions of truth, doth no less effectually evert the foundation of the church than the former. For, if the divine and human nature of Christ do not constitute one individual person, all that he did for us was only as a man -- which would have been altogether

insufficient for the salvation of the church, nor had God redeemed it with his own blood. This seems to be the opinion of some amongst us, at this day, about the person of Christ. They acknowledge the being of the eternal Word, the Son of God; and they allow in the like manner the verity of his human nature, or own that man Christ Jesus. Only they say, that the eternal Word was in him and with him, in the same kind as it is with other believers, but in a supreme degree of manifestation and power. But, though in these things there is a great endeavour to put a new colour and appearance on old imaginations, the design of Satan is one and the same in them all, viz., to oppose the building of the church upon its proper, sole foundation. And these things shall be afterwards expressly spoken unto.

I intend no more in these instances but briefly to demonstrate, ⁴¹that the principal opposition of the gates of hell unto the church lay always unto the building of it, by faith, on the person of Christ.

It were easy also to demonstrate that Mohammedanism, which hath been so sore a stroke unto the Christian profession, is nothing but a concurrence and combination of these two ways, of force and fraud, in opposition unto the person of Christ.

It is true that Satan, after all this, by another way, attempted the doctrine of the offices and grace of Christ, with the worship of God in him. And this he hath carried so far, as that it issued in a fatal antichristian apostasy; which is not of my present consideration.

But we may proceed to what is of our own immediate concernment. And the one work with that before described is still carried on. The person of Christ, the faith of the church concerning it, the relation of the church unto it, the building of the church on it, the life and preservation of the church thereby, are the things that the gates of hell are engaged in opposition unto. For,

1. It is known with what subtlety and urgency his divine nature and person are opposed by the Socinians. What an accession is made daily unto their incredulity, what inclination of mind multitudes do manifest towards their pernicious ways, are also evident unto all who have any concernment in or for religion. But this argument I have laboured in on other occasions.

2. Many, who expressly deny not his divine person, yet seem to grow weary of any concernment therein. A natural religion, or none at all, pleaseth them better than faith in God by Jesus Christ. That any thing more is necessary in religion, but what natural light will discover and conduct us in, with the moral duties of righteousness and honesty which it directs unto, there are too many that will not acknowledge. What is beyond the line of nature and reason is rejected as unintelligible mysteries or follies. The person and grace of Christ are supposed to breed all the disturbance in religion. Without them, the common notions of the Divine Being and goodness will guide men sufficiently unto eternal blessedness. They did so before the coming of Christ in the flesh, and may do so now he is gone to heaven.

3. There are some who have so ordered the frame of objective religion, as that it is very uncertain whether they leave any place for the person of Christ in it or no. For, besides their denial of the hypostatical union of his natures, they ascribe all that unto a light within them which God will effect only by Christ as a mediator. What are the internal actings of their minds, as unto faith and trust towards him, I know not; but, from their outward profession, he seems to be almost excluded.

4. There are not a few who pretend high unto religion and devotion, ⁴²who declare no erroneous conceptions about the doctrine of the person of Christ, who yet manifest themselves not to have that regard unto him which the Gospel prescribes and requires. Hence have we so many discourses published

about religion, the practical holiness and duties of obedience, written with great elegance of style, and seriousness in argument, wherein we can meet with little or nothing wherein Jesus Christ, his office, or his grace, are concerned. Yea, it is odds but in them all we shall meet with some reflections on those who judge them to be the life and centre of our religion. The things of Christ, beyond the example of his conversation on the earth, are of no use with such persons, unto the promotion of piety and gospel obedience. Concerning many books of this nature, we may say what a learned person did of one of old: "There were in it many things laudable and delectable, sed nomen Jesu non erat ibi."

5. Suited unto these manifest inclinations of the minds of men unto a neglect of Christ, in the religion they frame unto themselves -- dangerous and noxious insinuations concerning what our thoughts ought to be of him, are made and tendered. As, (1.) It is scandalously proposed and answered, "Of what use is the consideration of the person of Christ in our religion?" Such are the novel inquiries of men who suppose there is any thing in Christian religion wherein the person of Christ is of no consideration -- as though it were not the life and soul that animates the whole of it, that which gives it its especial form as Christian -- as though by virtue of our religion we received any thing from God, any benefit in mercy, grace, privilege, or glory, and not through the person of Christ -- as though any one duty or act of religion towards God could be acceptably performed by us, without a respect unto, or a consideration of, the person of Christ -- or that there were any lines of truth in religion as it is Christian, that did not relate thereunto. Such bold inquiries, with futilous answers annexed unto them, sufficiently manifest what acquaintance their authors have either with Christ himself, which in others they despise, or with his Gospel, which they pretend to embrace. (2.) A mock scheme of religion is framed, to represent the folly of them who design to learn the mind and will of God in and by him. (3.) Reproachful reflections are made on such as plead the necessity of acquaintance with him, or the knowledge of him, as though thereby they rejected the use of the gospel. (4.) Professed love unto the person of Christ is traduced, as a mere fancy and vapour of distempered minds or weak imaginations. (5.) The union of the Lord Christ and his church is asserted to be political only, with respect unto laws and rules of government. And many other things of an alike nature are asserted, derogatory unto his glory, and repugnant unto the faith of the church; such as, from the foundation of Christian religion, were never vented by any persons before, who did not openly avow some impious heresy concerning his person. And I no way doubt but that men may, with less guilt and scandal, fall under sundry doctrinal misapprehensions concerning it -- than, by crying hail thereunto, to despoil it of all its glory, as unto our concernment therein, in our practical obedience unto God. Such things have we deserved to see and hear.

6. The very name or expression of "preaching Christ" is become a term of reproach and contempt; nor can some, as they say, understand what is meant thereby, unless it be an engine to drive all rational preaching, and so all morality and honesty, out of the world.

7. That which all these things tend unto and centre in, is that horrible profaneness of life -- that neglect of all gospel duties -- that contempt of all spiritual graces and their effects, which the generality of them that are called Christians, in many places, are given up unto. I know not whether it were not more for the honour of Christ, that such persons would publicly renounce the profession of his name, rather than practically manifest their inward disregard unto him.

That by these and the like means Satan doth yet attempt the ruin of the church, as unto its building on the everlasting rock, falls under the observation of all who are concerned in its welfare. And (whatever others may apprehend concerning this state of things in the world) how any that love the Lord Jesus in sincerity -- especially such as are called to declare and represent him unto men in the office of the ministry -- can

acquit themselves to be faithful unto him, without giving their testimony against, and endeavouring to stop what lies in them, the progress of this prevailing declension from the only foundation of the church, I know not; nor will it be easy for themselves to declare. And in that variety of conceptions which are about him, and the opposition that is made unto him, there is nothing more necessary than that we should renew and attest our confession of him -- as the Son of the living God -- the only rock whereon the church of them that shall be saved is founded and built.

"Pauca ideo de Christo," as Tertullian speaks; some few things concerning the person of Christ, with respect unto the confession of Peter, and the promise thereunto annexed -- wherein he is declared the sole foundation of the church -- will be comprised in the ensuing discourse. And He who hath ordained strength out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, as he hath given ability to express these poor, mean contemplations of his glory, can raise by them a revenue of honour unto himself in the hearts of them that do believe. And some few things I must premise, in general, unto what I do design. As,

1. The instances which I shall give concerning the use and consideration ⁴⁴of the person of Christ in Christian religion, or of him as he is the foundation whereon the church is built, are but few -- and those perhaps not the most signal or eminent which the greater spiritual wisdom and understanding of others might propose. And, indeed, who shall undertake to declare what are the chief instances of this incomprehensible effect of divine wisdom? "What is his name, and what is his son's name, if thou canst tell?" Prov. xxx. 4. See Isa. ix. 6. It is enough for us to stand in a holy admiration, at the shore of this unsearchable ocean, and to gather up some parcels of that divine treasure wherewith the Scripture of truth is enriched.

2. I make no pretence of searching into the bottom or depths of any part of this "great mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh." They are altogether unsearchable, unto the line of the most enlightened minds, in this life. What we shall farther comprehend of them in the other world, God only knows. We cannot in these things, by our utmost diligent search, "find out the Almighty unto perfection." The prophets could not do so of old, nor can the angels themselves at present, who "desire to look into these things:" 1 Pet. i. 10-12. Only I shall endeavour to represent unto the faith of them that do believe, somewhat of what the Scripture doth plainly reveal -- evidencing in what sense the person of Christ is the sole foundation of the church.

3. I shall not, herein, respect them immediately by whom the divine person of Christ is denied and opposed. I have formerly treated thereof, beyond their contradiction in way of reply. But it is their conviction which I shall respect herein, who, under an outward confession of the truth, do -- either notionally or practically, either ignorantly or designedly, God knows, I know not -- endeavour to weaken the faith of the church in its adherence unto this foundation. Howbeit, neither the one sort nor the other hath any place in my thoughts, in comparison of the instruction and edification of others, who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.

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