



The Priesthood of Christ

John Owen

CHRISTIAN
HERITAGE



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THIS EDITION

The contents of this book first appeared as an excursus in John Owen's exposition of Hebrews. The text here is unchanged apart from the following features, designed to make the book more user-friendly:

1. Approximately seven percent of the original text was in Latin. This has been translated so the whole book is now accessible to non-Latin speakers.
2. Subheadings, sometimes extending to four levels and largely based on the original numeric structure, have been inserted. The contents pages include primary and secondary subheadings to aid navigation.
3. Sentences enumerating more than five or six items, lists of more than one sentence, selected notes, and some 'short digressions' are broken off from the main text and displayed.
4. The style and placement of biblical references has been made consistent with modern practice and Roman numerals have been changed to Arabic.
5. Words such as 'unto' become 'to' and 'doth consist' becomes 'consists'.



INTRODUCTION

The Priesthood of Christ is now the fourth work of John Owen, the great Puritan theologian-pastor, which Dr Philip Ross has redressed in modern publishing clothes for a twenty-first century readership.

Some readers may find this particular work a greater reading challenge than either of the earlier volumes: *The Glory of Christ*, *The Holy Spirit*, and *Communion with God*. But the effort will prove to be immensely worthwhile. For this is a significant work on a major biblical doctrine. Owen himself believed it was probably the most substantial work to date on the theme. While it is now three hundred and fifty years old its burden addresses issues that remain vitally important today. Yet for Owen these 350 pages amounted to what nowadays would be referred to as an ‘excursus’ in a much larger work!

Who was this John Owen who was capable not only of writing these pages but another twelve thousand besides? — *The Priesthood of Christ* accounts for only part of one volume in an immense corpus of works.

In brief, John Owen was born in a vicarage in Stadhampton, near Oxford, in 1616. His early education was followed by studies at Oxford University (graduating B.A. in 1632), time spent as a private tutor, pastoral service in two congregations, first in Fordham in





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Essex and then at Coggeshall (a congregation of over 2,000), service as a chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, a period as Vice Chancellor of Oxford University (in American terms, the President), ejection from the Church of England in 1662 as a 'Nonconformist,' and finally a period towards the end of his life when he served in pastoral ministry in a gathered congregation in Leadenhall Street, London. He died in Ealing (then a pleasant village, now a London suburb) in 1683.

A man of immense learning, Owen's collected Works extend to twenty-four substantial volumes. They fall, essentially, into four categories:

- (i) expositions of specific doctrines;
- (ii) pastoral and practical teaching;
- (iii) writings dealing with controversies;
- (iv) biblical exposition.

Dominating this last category is a massive exposition of the Letter to the Hebrews, well over 3,000 pages in length. 'It is' wrote Thomas Chalmers, 'a work of gigantic strength as well as gigantic size; and he who has mastered it is very little short, both in respect to the doctrinal and the practical of Christianity of being an erudite and accomplished theologian.'

The Priesthood of Christ (originally entitled *Concerning the Sacerdotal Office of Christ*) forms one of a series of introductory essays ('Exercitations' in Owen's now disused language). They contain material which nowadays might appear in a series of excursuses or appendices in which the author might review or further develop material which would be inappropriate in the body of the text, or be too extensive for a footnote.

In Owen's hands these exercitations are advance expositions in which he discusses important theological issues and points up their relevance. In relation to his commentary on Hebrews they serve a similar role to the one Calvin's *Institutes* play in relation to his commentaries, enabling him essentially to say to the reader 'For further discussion see the exercitations.'

Owen wrote for serious readers. ('If you have come like Cato into the theatre,' he greets his readers on one occasion, 'Farewell, you have had your entertainment!'). Thus this 'precursus' on Christ's priestly ministry is a work of such substance that it stretches the





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powers of a culture more accustomed to the three or four sentence, multi-paragraph pages of contemporary books. But the dividends of thoughtful reading are immense.

It may help us as readers if two things are available to us before we set out on the journey on which Owen will lead us: (i) A road map to provide some sense of direction to the journey, and (ii) some basic knowledge of the major individuals and theological controversies singled out by Owen in his discussion.

A MAP FOR THE ROAD

Owen develops his theme in a logical and theological order. The exposition begins with a discussion of the origin of priestly ministry. Its necessity arises from the presence of sin:

A supposition of the entrance of sin, and what ensued thereon in the curse of the law, lie at the foundation of the designation of the priesthood and sacrifice of Christ (see p. 68).

Owen does not mean that the plan of redemption is a divine afterthought, a poor Plan B cobbled together because of the failure of Plan A. Rather it is rooted in eternity in the inter-personal purposes of the Father and the Son together with the Spirit. Readers of *Communion with God* will recognise here Owen's profound interest in the inner relations in the Trinity and their far reaching implications.

There were, Owen argues, 'eternal transactions' between the Father and the Son with respect to the work of redemption. These were of a covenantal or federal nature.¹

Owen shared with the earlier Scottish theologian, Robert Rollock, the view that all of God's relations with respect to creation and redemption are covenantal in nature. In particular he viewed God's work in history unfolding in terms of four covenants:

¹ 'Federal' from the Latin *foedus-er* is a covenant or treaty. Owen's exposition here, as in a number of places, provides the reader with a series of mini-seminars on important theological themes. Pausing on them, without being frustrated that the argument does not move with contemporary rapidity, will add to the riches of the study.





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- (i) a covenant of works made with Adam in creation;
- (ii) a covenant of grace, made with Adam following the Fall and fulfilled in the work of Christ;
- (iii) a covenant made through Moses, which he believed had aspects of both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, and
- (iv) an inner-Trinitarian covenant between the Father and the Son, the covenant of redemption.

While it often comes as a surprise to readers of Owen to discover that his federal theology was not simply a reiteration of, for example, *The Confession of Faith*, he was by no means unique in holding the four covenant view, nor in particular the ‘mixed covenant’ view of Sinai.²

In view in these covenant purposes is the salvation of sinners for the glory of God—demonstrated in the manner in which he displays his wisdom, justice and grace in the gospel of Christ.

This plan then raises the question: What did this involve for the Son? Two things:

- (i) obedience (he becomes the Servant of the Lord), and
- (ii) sacrifice (he becomes the Suffering Servant who bears God’s judgment on man’s sin).

The covenant of grace, the covenant of redemption, the coming of Christ—these are all necessary for our salvation. Yet they remain the free act of God. The justice of God and the mercy of God are not opposed to one another (as though the former were an involuntary necessity while the latter is an act of voluntary condescension). God freely performs that which is necessary for man’s salvation; he freely exercises the judgment against man’s sin that his nature necessarily requires.

In the light of the fact that God has committed himself to our salvation in all persons of the Trinity, Owen continues, Christ had

² This is all the more striking in the light of the fact that Owen was involved in the composition of *The Savoy Declaration* which simply echoed the Westminster document at this point. Clearly it was not a matter for which he would have gone to the stake.





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to suffer what we deserve (it was an action of consequent absolute necessity given the prior commitment to save):

The Lord underwent the punishment due to our sins in the judgment of God, and according to the sentence of the law; for how did God make our sins to meet on him, how did he bear them, if he did not suffer the penalty due to them, or if he underwent some other inconvenience, but not the exact demerit of sin? (p. 181)

The Father lovingly sent the Son in our place. Christ then became our substitute; the Father punishes our sin even when it is borne before him by his own beloved Son. For God hates sin, and not to judge it would impeach his own glory. Herein lies the heart and wonder of the cross—heaven’s love and heaven’s justice meet.

This is what makes the priesthood of Christ a necessity. He must become both sacrificing priest and sacrificial lamb. Owen argues — surely rightly—that without this perspective the cross cannot be the foundation for a coherent theology. Priestly, substitutionary, penal substitution is of the essence of the atonement. Any perspective on the atonement that denies or lacks the notion of penal substitution must fail to provide a rational for redemption from the guilt and power of sin.

Thus, for Owen, any theology of the atonement that reduces the work of Christ to either the kingly role (Christ conquers our enemies) or the prophetic role (Christ reveals the Father’s love to overwhelm us and turn us from sin, or as an example to us of how to live in sacrificial love) disembowels the gospel. It cannot provide an adequate grounding for the cry of dereliction. The cross becomes either inessential, or too high a price for the blessing purchased by it. The cross cannot be fully explained as Jesus identifying himself with us in our need to show us the love of God. For, as James Denney pointed out long ago, if I see a man drowning in a river I do not demonstrate my love for him, nor do I rescue him by jumping in and drowning with him. No, the wonder of the love of God at the cross is that while we were sinners Christ died for us in order to justify us and save us from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:8–10). The cross is a revelation of love only because there God made Christ to be sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), and a curse (Gal. 3:13).

Substitutionary self-sacrifice (eye for eye, tooth for tooth, man





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for man) is therefore essential to Christ's priesthood. He comes to act for the church before the face of God. His life, with its slow but divinely ordained journey to Calvary constitute his preparation for this ministry; his maculation, or sacrificial slaying and his oblation in his shedding of his precious blood are forerunners of his representation as he stands on our behalf before the throne of God.

Charitie Lee Bancroft was therefore right, after all:

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong, a perfect plea . . .

When Satan tempts me to despair,
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see him there
Who made an end to all my sin.
Because the sinless Saviour died
My sinful soul is counted free;
For God, the just, is satisfied
To look on him and pardon me.

There Christ serves us as intercessor—not, in Owen's view, so much by formal representation of our needs in words audibly spoken to his Father and ours, but in a virtual manner (i.e. real and powerful way).³

But, Owen notes, Christ came 'in the fullness of time'. What of before? He provides the standard Augustinian biblical-theological answer: God prefigured the work of Christ in the priestly sacrifices of the Old Testament period, whether those offered before the Law of Moses or according to it. In the providence of God, priestly ministry was exercised prior to Sinai (cf. Exod. 19:22, 24) as well as according to the pattern given at Sinai. By means of the Old Testament priesthood old covenant saints looked forward in faith by way of promise to that priesthood of Christ to which we look back in faith.

Here—it may seem both curiously and unexpectedly—Owen bids farewell to his readers (p. 351). Day to day humanity breaks momentarily interrupts his massive, driving intellect. In essence Owen thinks the excursus is already long enough, although (as ever!) there is still much to say. But—we could not have guessed—

³ Owen is using the term in its Latin sense: *virtus*, strength or power.





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he is in fact feeling unwell, and the printer is knocking at his door for a complete manuscript. We will—he hopes—excuse him if he leaves further exposition for later!

Indeed we will.

But just before setting out on the reading journey, it may be helpful to provide further orientation—this time to some of the individuals and issues Owen addresses.

PEOPLE TO MEET, ISSUES TO FACE

There are some historical and theological landmarks in *The Priesthood of Christ* that may not be wholly familiar to contemporary readers and a few comments about them may provide helpful orientation to what follows.

Given Owen's context (he is writing in 1668) we might expect him to comment on Roman Catholic teaching.

Owen's grandparents were alive at the time of the Spanish Armada—an invading force calculated to bring England back to subservience to the papacy. He was born less than a hundred years from the date when Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* exploded onto the church of early sixteenth century Europe. The reign of 'Bloody Mary' (1496–1533) when large numbers of Protestants had been executed, was within living memory. The Stuart monarchy of Owen's own day had taken a decided Rome-ward direction in the eyes of many. Roman Catholicism was not merely a religious issue; it was a political one. So we find here critique of Roman Catholic theology.

Owen also lived during the period when the Quaker movement appeared to be gaining momentum. Here too he had issues (it should not be forgotten that while 'Quaker' today may convey the idea of a pacifism and quietism, the nomenclature was originally expressive of a very different aspect of radical religious life. While by no means a homogeneous group, the nickname 'quakers' was expressive of some of the more radical groups. In addition, such theologically significant figures the Lutheran Andreas Osiander (1498–1552) and the Dutch lawyer-theologian Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) also make cameo appearances in these pages.

But throughout this work (and it is not alone in his corpus of writings) it is Socinianism that Owen chiefly has in his cross hairs.





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‘SOCINIANISM’?

Socinianism was in some respects similar to Arianism in the early church and Unitarianism today. Its distinctives included denying the eternal deity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the centrality of penal substitution. For all practical purposes it saw Jesus as a unique man given supreme authority and (at least in its earlier forms) to be worshiped only as a kind of representative symbol of God. It taught that salvation (insofar as it was necessary for those not totally depraved) came through repentance and good works. Many of its emphases would reappear in developed form in, for example, the teaching of Lord Herbert (1583–1648, elder brother of the great metaphysical pastor-poet, George Herbert).

The rise of this theology at the time of the Reformation is traced back to Lelio Sozzini (Latin: *Laelius Socinus*), an Italian, and his nephew Fausto (Latin: *Faustus Socinus*). Born in Siena in 1525, Lelio was a man of unusual charm and free spirit, with an enquiring but restless mind. Underwritten by his father he was able to travel widely and came into contact with the burgeoning groups of men whose intelligent minds and eager hearts had been captured by the evangelical reformation. Sozzini’s attractive personality and inquisitive mind gave him an entrée to such luminaries as Luther’s colleague and friend Phillip Melanchthon, Heinrich Bullinger, and John Calvin.

At various times Sozzini questioned Calvin on such matters as predestination, the resurrection of the body, and the grounds of salvation. Calvin’s correspondence with him is partially extant, and in it he expresses the two sides of Sozzini he had obviously experienced. Thus he wrote to him in 1551:

The word of God...is my only guide, and to acquiesce in its plain doctrines shall be my constant rule of wisdom. Would that you also, my dear Lelio, would learn to regulate your powers with the same moderation! You have no reason to expect a reply from me so long as you bring forward those monstrous questions. If you are gratified by floating among these aerial speculations...I am very greatly grieved that the fine talents with which God has endowed you, should be occupied not only with what is vain and fruitless, but that they should also be injured by pernicious figments. What I warned you of long ago, I must again





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seriously repeat, that unless you correct in time this itching after investigation, it is to be feared that you will bring upon yourself severe suffering. I should be cruel towards you did I treat with a show of indulgence what I believe to be a very dangerous error...

Adieu, brother very highly esteemed by me; and if this rebuke is harsher than it ought to be, ascribe it to my love to you.

A year or so later, following the trial and death of the anti-trinitarian Michael Servetus, Sozzini's own mind turned to the issue of the trinity itself, which he would likewise come to reject.

Sozzini died in 1562, a couple of years before Calvin. But he had by that time exercised considerable influence on his young nephew Fausto who both imbibed and developed his uncle's thought. More than that, he published his anti-trinitarian views and as a result, Calvin's fears for the uncle were fulfilled in the nephew, who was persecuted and physically abused. From 1579 until his death in 1604 he lived in Poland, and it was there that his influence became virtually institutionalised.

Several of Fausto's leading colleagues seem to have been involved in both 'perfecting' the catechism he had prepared (later published as the *Racovian Catechism*) and disseminating their Unitarian and Socinian views. These included Johannes Crellius (1590–1633) who became Rector of the University of Cracow, Johannes Volkelius (died 1618) who may have acted as an amanuensis to Socinus, and Valentinius Smalcius, all of whom, along with Ludwig Woolzogenius, Owen both mentions and vigorously critiques.

This was not the first time Owen had dealt with Socinianism. In 1652 an Englishman John Biddle⁴ had translated and published the *Racovian Catechism* (it was condemned by Parliament in April 1652, and all copies were to be burned). Indeed Parliament had requested Owen's help to deal with Socinianism and in 1655 he published an extensive and devastating critique in *Vindiciae Evangelicae*.

In *The Priesthood of Christ*, however, Owen's central concern with Socinianism is that it reduces the priesthood of Christ to his roles as prophet and king and thus destroys both its centrality and its distinctive significance. In Socinianism Christ's death amounts to

⁴ Biddle had also translated a *Memoir of the Life of Faustus Socinus* in 1653.



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little more than a revelation of God's heart of love; it is not therefore an atoning action of sacrifice made for our sins.

While Owen by no means denies that all of Christ's offices belong together, and may be exercised simultaneously, nor ignore the fact that God does reveal his love at the cross, he insists that something was definitively accomplished on the cross to procure our salvation. Otherwise it does not reveal the heart of God. As in other areas, Owen recognises that behind the Socinian view lies an inadequate view of God, an unbiblical diminution of the gravity of sin and an inevitable downplaying of the reality of the judgment and wrath of God.

RELEVANCE TO TODAY?

But why should Owen's exposition of Christ's priesthood, and his polemic against Socinianism have relevance to today's church? Because we live in currents of theological thought at both the academic and popular levels where echoes of Socinus can be heard.

There is no doubt a very pressing need for us to understand that Christ's ministry was a revelatory one (the prophetic office) and the establishing of a new order in his kingdom (the kingly office). But to see the *Christus Victor* motif—Christ the Conquering King, or the Lordship of Christ, or even for that matter the kingdom of Christ, as central to the New Testament's gospel without emphasising the central role of his vicarious sacrifice and substitutionary death under the judgment and wrath of God as the heart of our salvation is a fatal blunder for theology, pastoral ministry, and world evangelism.

It will be said that the earliest Christian Confession was 'Jesus is Lord' and not 'Jesus is Priest.' But that is not the point. The point is that it is as Saviour, as Substitute, as Penalty-Bearer, crucified and risen, that he now is Lord—not apart from that. His power to bring deliverance is not naked power but atoning power (as Hebrews 1:1–4; 2: 5–14) clarifies.

Years ago the Swedish Lutheran theologian Gustav Aulén famously argued in his book *Christus Victor*⁵ that Martin Luther saw the Kingship of Christ, not his penal substitutionary death (priesthood) as central to the gospel. Aulén's own theology,

⁵ First published in Swedish in 1930 and in English in 1931.





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however, made it clear that this was by no means an unbiased conviction. Penal substitution was not central in his own exposition of the work of Christ.⁶

More recently among some adherents of the so-called 'New Perspective on Paul' a similar argument for the central role of Christ's kingship and the centrality of the Christus Victor motif (Jesus is Lord) has been made to the diminution if not exclusion of the gravity of sin as guilt, the righteous judgment of God on sin, and the reality of divine wrath. In emerging and emergent ecclesiastical circles echoes of the same have been heard.

Owen will have none of this. Probably no theologian in the English language has ever rivalled him in stressing the absolute centrality of Christ's penal substitution, and therefore his role as Priest. The point is that Christ is not victor unless he is first substitute. The deliverance he brings requires that he deal with both the guilt of sin and the wrath of God as well as our bondage to the powers of darkness.

For that reason alone *The Priesthood of Christ* is worth all the time it takes to read it with humility, care, and reflection. Written as it was in the mid-seventeenth century, and providing a vigorous theological workout for many readers, there are important points at which it remains a tract for the times.

So, with some quick map reading, and a little warning that you may meet strangers on the way, and have some hard thinking to do, it is time for your journey to begin. I hope that, even if the road sometimes calls for perseverance, the walk will be bracing, and at the end you will be grateful to Owen that you are stronger spiritually and theologically than you were at the beginning.

Probably no theologian in the English language has ever rivalled Owen stressing the absolute centrality of Christ's penal substitution...For that reason alone The Priesthood of Christ is worth all the time it takes to read it with humility, care, and reflection.

Sinclair B Ferguson
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⁶ As his *The Faith of the Christian Church* (Swedish, 1923; English, 1948) demonstrated.





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A UNIQUE EMPHASIS ON CHRIST'S PRIESTHOOD

Amongst the many excellencies of this Epistle to the Hebrews, which render it as useful to the church as the sun in the firmament is to the world, the revelation that is made therein concerning the nature, singular pre-eminence, and use of the priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ, may well be esteemed to deserve the first and principal place; for whereas the whole matter of the sacrifice that he offered, and the atonement that he made thereby, with the inestimable benefits which thence redound to them that do believe, depend solely on this, the excellency of the doctrine of this must needs be acknowledged by all who have any interest in these things. It is indeed, in the substance of it, delivered in some other passages of the books of the New Testament, but yet more sparingly and obscurely than any other truth of the same or a like importance. The Holy Ghost reserved it to this as its proper place, where, upon the consideration of the institutions of the Old Testament and their removal out of the church, it might be duly represented, as that which gave an end to them in their accomplishment, and life to those ordinances of evangelical worship which were to succeed in their room.



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When our Lord Jesus says that he came to ‘give his life a ransom for many’ (Matt. 20:28), he had respect to the sacrifice that he had to offer as a priest. The same also is intimated where he is called ‘The Lamb of God’ (John 1:29); for he was himself both priest and sacrifice. Our apostle also mentions his sacrifice and his offering of himself to God (Eph. 5:2); on the account of which he calls him ‘a propitiation’ (Rom. 3:25); and mentions also his ‘intercession,’ with the benefits of that (Rom. 8:34). The clearest testimony to this purpose is that of the apostle John, who puts together both the general acts of his sacerdotal office, and intimates with that their mutual relation (1 John 2:1–2); for his intercession as our ‘advocate’ with his Father respects his oblation as he was a ‘propitiation for our sins.’ So the same apostle tells us to the same purpose, that he ‘washed us in his own blood’ (Rev. 1:5), when he expiated our sins by the sacrifice of himself. These are, if not all, yet the principal places in the New Testament in which immediate respect is had to the priesthood or sacrifice of Christ. But in none of them is he called ‘a priest,’ or ‘an high priest,’ nor is he said in any of them to have taken any such office upon him; neither is the nature of his oblation or intercession explained in them, nor the benefits rehearsed which accrue to us from his discharge of this office in a peculiar manner. Of what concernment these things are to our faith, obedience, and consolation—of what use to us in the whole course of our profession, in all our duties and temptations, sins and sufferings—we shall, God assisting, declare in the ensuing exposition. Now, for all the acquaintance we have with these and sundry other evangelical mysteries belonging to them or depending on them, with all the light we have into the nature and use of Mosaic institutions, and the types of the Old Testament, which make so great a part of the Scripture given and continued for our instruction, we are entirely obliged to the revelation made in and by this epistle.

A MYSTERIOUS DOCTRINE

And this doctrine, concerning the priesthood of Christ and the sacrifice that he offered, is on many accounts deep and mysterious. This our apostle plainly intimates in sundry passages of this epistle. With respect to this he says, the discourse he intended was *δυσσεμήνευτος λέγειν*, ‘hard to be uttered,’ or rather, hard to be





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understood when uttered (Heb. 5:11); as also another apostle, that there are in this epistle *δυσνόητά τινα* (2 Pet. 3:16), ‘some things hard to be understood,’ which relate to this. Hence he requires that those who attend to this doctrine should be past the condition of living on ‘milk’ only, or being contented with the first rudiments and principles of religion; and that they be able to digest ‘strong meat,’ by having ‘their senses exercised to discern both good and evil’ (Heb. 5:12–14). And when he resolves to proceed in the explication of it, he declares that he is leading them ‘on to perfection’ (Heb. 6:1), or to the highest and most perfect doctrines in the mystery of Christian religion. And several other ways he manifests his judgment, as of the importance of this truth, and how needful it is to be known, so of the difficulty there is in coming to a right and full understanding of it. And all these things do justify an especial and peculiar inquiry into it.

WHY FOCUS ON THIS SUBJECT?

Now, although our apostle, in his excellent order and method, has delivered to us all the material concernments of this sacred office of Christ, yet he has not done it in an entire discourse, but in such a way as his subject-matter and principal design would admit of, and indeed did necessitate. He does not in any one place, nor upon any one occasion, express and teach the whole of the doctrine concerning it, but, as himself speaks in another case, *πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως*, ‘by various parts,’ or degrees, and ‘in sundry ways,’ he declares and makes known the several concernments of it: for this he did partly as the Hebrews could bear it; partly as the series of his discourse led him to the mention of it, having another general end in design; and partly as the explanation of the old Aaronic institutions and ordinances, which, for the benefit of them that still adhered to them, he aimed at, required it of him.

For me to have undertaken the discourse of the whole upon any particular occasion, would have lengthened out a digression too much, diverting the reader in his perusal of the exposition; and had I insisted on the several parts and concernments of it as they do occur, I should have been necessitated to a frequent repetition of the same things. Neither way could I have given an entire representation of it, whereby the beauty and the symmetry of the whole might be





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made evident. This, therefore, inclined my thoughts, in the first place, to comprise a summary of the entire doctrine concerning it in these previous exercitations. From hence, as the reader may take a prospect of it singly by itself, so he may, if he please, carry along much insight with him from it into the most abstruse passages in the whole epistle. And this, added to what we have discoursed on chapter 1:2, concerning the kingly right and power of Christ, will give a more full and complete account of these his two offices than, it may be, has as yet been attempted by any.

NOT THE POPE'S FAVOURITE DOCTRINE

Moreover, the doctrine concerning the priesthood and sacrifice of the Lord Christ has in all ages, by the craft and malice of Satan, been either directly opposed or variously corrupted; for it contains the principal foundation of the faith and consolation of the church, which are by him chiefly maligned. It is known in how many things and by how many ways it has been obscured and depraved in the Papacy. Sundry of them we have occasion to deal about in our exposition of many passages of the epistle; for they have not so much directly opposed the truth of the doctrine, as, disbelieving the use and benefit of the thing itself to the church, they have substituted various false and superstitious observances to effect the end to which this priesthood of Christ and his holy discharge thereof are alone of God designed. These, therefore, I shall no otherwise consider but as their opinions and practices occur occasionally to us, either in these exercitations or in the exposition ensuing.

But there is a generation of men, whom the craft of Satan has stirred up in this and the foregoing age, who have made it a great part of their preposterous and pernicious endeavours in and about religion to overthrow this whole office of the Lord Christ, and the efficacy of the sacrifice of himself depending thereon. This they have attempted with much subtilty and diligence, introducing a metaphorical or imaginary priesthood and sacrifice in their room; so, robbing the church of its principal treasure, they pretend to supply the end of it with their own fancies. They are the Socinians whom I intend. And there are more reasons than one why I could not omit a strict examination of their reasonings





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and objections against this great part of the mystery of the gospel. The reputation of parts, industry, and learning, which the bold curiosity of some has given to them, makes it necessary, at least upon unavoidable occasions, to obviate the insinuation of their poison, which that opens a way for. Besides, even among ourselves, they are not a few who embrace and do endeavour to propagate their opinions.

And the same course, with their faces seeming to look another way, is steered by the Quakers, who have at last openly espoused almost all their pernicious tenets, although in some things as yet they obscure their sentiments in cloudy expressions, as wanting will or skill to make a more perspicuous declaration of them.

And there are others also, pretending to more sobriety than those before mentioned, who do yet think that these doctrines concerning the offices and mediation of Christ are, if not unintelligible by us, yet not of any great necessity to be insisted on; for of that esteem are the mysteries of the gospel grown to be with some, with many among us. With respect to all these, added to the consideration of the edification of those that are sober and godly, I esteemed it necessary to handle this whole doctrine of the priesthood of Christ distinctly, and previously to our exposition of the uses of it as they occur in the epistle.

A COMPREHENSIVE ENDEAVOUR

There are also sundry things which may contribute much light to this doctrine, and be useful in the explication of the terms, notions, and expressions, which are applied to the declaration of it, that cannot directly and orderly be reduced under any singular text or passage in the epistle. Many dawnings there were in the world to the rising of this Sun of Righteousness—many preparations for the actual exhibition of this High Priest to the discharge of his office. And some of these were greatly instructive in the nature of this priesthood, as being appointed of God for that purpose. Such was the use of sacrifices, ordained from the foundation of the world, or the first entrance of sin; and the designation of persons in the church to the office of a figurative priesthood, for the performance of that service. By these God intended to instruct the church in the





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nature and benefit of what he would after accomplish, in and by his Son Jesus Christ. These things, therefore—that is, what belonged to the rite of sacrificing and the Mosaic priesthood—must be taken into consideration, as retaining yet that light in them which God had designed them to be communicative of. And, indeed, our apostle himself reduces many of the instructions which he gives us in the nature of the priesthood and sacrifice of Christ to those institutions which were designed of old to typify and represent them. Besides all these, there may be observed sundry things in the common usages of mankind about this office, and the discharge of it in general, that deserve our consideration; for although all mankind, left out of the church's enclosure, through their own blindness and the craft of him who originally seduced them into an apostasy from God, had, as to their own interest and practice, miserably deprived all sacred things, every thing that belonged to the worship or service of the Divine Being, yet they still carried along with them something that had its first fountain and spring in divine revelation, and a congruity to the inbred principles of nature. In these also—where we can separate the wheat from the chaff, what was from divine revelation or the light of nature from what was of diabolical delusion or vain superstition—we may discover what is useful and helpful to us in our design. By these means may we be enabled to reduce all sacred truth in this matter to its proper principles, and direct it to its proper end.

And these are the reasons why, although we shall have frequent occasion to insist on this office of Christ, with the proper acts and effects of it, in our ensuing exposition, both in that part of it which accompanies these exertions and those also which, in the goodness and patience of God, may follow, yet I thought meet to handle the whole doctrine of it apart in preliminary discourses. And let not the reader suppose that he shall be imposed on with the same things handled in several ways twice over: for as the design of the exposition is to open the words of the text, to give their sense, with the purpose and arguings of the apostle, applying all to the improvement of our faith and obedience, of which nothing will here fall under our consideration; so what may be here discoursed, historically, philologically, dogmatically, or eristically, will admit of no repetition or rehearsal in the expository part of our endeavours.



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These things being premised, as was necessary, we apply ourselves to the work lying before us.

BIBLICAL TERMS FOR 'PRIEST'

Our Lord Jesus Christ is in the Old Testament, as prophesied of, called כֹּהֵן, 'cohen:' (Ps. 110:4) אַתָּה־כֹּהֵן לְעוֹלָם —'Thou art cohen for ever.' And Zechariah 6:13, וְיָהִי כֹהֵן עַל־כִּסֵּאוֹ —'And he shall be cohen upon his throne.' We render it in both places 'a priest,' that is, ἱερεύς, 'sacerdos.' In the New Testament, that is, in this Epistle, he is frequently said to be ἱερεύς and ἀρχιερεύς; which we likewise express by 'priest' and 'high priest;'—'pontifex,' 'pontifex maximus.' And the meaning of these words must be first inquired into.

קָהַן, the verb, is used only in Piel, 'cihen;' and it signifies 'sacerdotio fungi,' or 'munus sacerdotale exercere,'—'to be a priest,' or 'to exercise the office of the priesthood;' ἱεουργέω. The LXX mostly render it by ἱερατεύω, which is 'sacerdotio fungor,'—'to exercise the priestly office;' although it be also used in the inauguration or consecration of a person to the priesthood. Once they translate it by λειτουργέω (2 Chron. 11:14), 'in sacris operari,'—'to serve (or minister) in (or about) sacred things.' ἱεουργέω is used by our apostle in this sense, and applied to the preaching of the gospel: Εἰς τὸ εἶναί με λειτουργὸν Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ εἰς τὰ ἔθνη, ἱεουργοῦντα τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ (Rom. 15:16);—'Employed in the sacred ministration of the gospel.' He uses both λειτουργός and ἱεουργέω metaphorically, with respect to the προσφορά or sacrifice which he made of the Gentiles, which was also metaphorical. And ἱερατεύω is used by Luke with respect to the Jewish service in the temple (Luke 1:8); for originally both the words have respect to proper sacrifices.

Some would have the word קָהַן to be ambiguous, and to signify 'officio fungi, aut ministrare in sacris aut politicis,'—'to discharge an office, or to minister in things sacred or political.' But no instance can be produced of its use to this purpose. Once it seems to be applied to things not sacred. Isaiah 61:10, כִּתְּוֹן יִכְהֵן פָּאֵר —'As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments;' or, 'adorns himself with beauty;' that is, beautiful garments. If the word did originally and properly signify 'to adorn,' it might be thence translated to

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the exercise of the office of the priesthood, seeing the priests therein were, by especial institution, to be clothed with garments **לְכָבוֹד וְלְתִפְאֵרָה** (Exod. 28:40), ‘for glory and for beauty.’ So the priests of Moloch were called ‘chemarims,’ from the colour of their garments, or their countenances made black with the soot of their fire and sacrifices. But this is not the proper signification of the word; only, denoting the priesthood to be exercised in beautiful garments and sundry ornaments, it was thence traduced to express adorning. The LXX render it by περιτίθημι, but withal acknowledge somewhat sacerdotal in the expression: Ὡς νυμφίῳ περιέθηκέ μοι μίτρᾱν—‘He has put on me’ (restraining the action to God) ‘a mitre as on a bridegroom;’ which was a sacerdotal ornament. And Aquila, ‘as a bridegroom, ἱερατευμένος στεφάνῳ.’—‘bearing the crown of the priesthood,’ or discharging the priest’s office in a crown. And the Targum, observing the peculiar application of the word in this place, adds, **וּכְכֹהֵנָא דְכֹהֵנָא**—‘And as an high priest is adorned.’ All agree that an allusion is made to the garments and ornaments of the high priest. The place may be tendered, ‘As a bridegroom, he’ (that is God, the bridegroom of the church) ‘does consecrate me with glory;’—‘gloriously set me apart for himself.’ The word therefore is sacred; and though כֹּהֵן be traduced to signify other persons, as we shall see afterwards, yet כֹּהֵן [properly] is only used in a sacred sense.

DIVINATION AND SOOTHSAYING

The Arabic כֹּהֵן, ‘cahan,’ is ‘to divine, to prognosticate, to be a soothsayer, to foretell;’ and כֹּהֵן, ‘caahan,’ is ‘a diviner, a prophet, an astrologer, a figure-caster.’ This use of it came up after the priests had generally taken themselves to such arts, partly curious, partly diabolical, by the instigation of the false gods whom they ministered to. Homer puts them together, as they came afterwards mostly to be the same, Iliad. A. 62:

ἀλλ’ ἄγε δὴ τινα μάντιν ἐρείομεν, ἢ ἱερεῖα
ἢ καὶ ὄνειροπόλον,

‘A prophet, or a priest, or an interpreter of dreams.’



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Μάγους καὶ αστρονόμους τε καὶ θύτας μετεπέμπετο (Herod., lib. 4); 'He sent for magicians, astronomers, and priests; for θύτης is a priest; for the priests first gave out oracles and divinations in the temples of their gods. From them proceeded a generation of impostors, who exceedingly infatuated the world with a pretense of foretelling things to come, of interpreting dreams, and doing things uncouth and strange, to the amazement of the beholders. And as they all pretended to derive their skill and power from their gods, whose priests they were, so they invented, or had suggested to them by Satan, various ways and means of divination, or of attaining the knowledge of particular future events. According to those ways which in especial any of them attended to were they severally denominated. Generally they were called חֲכָמִים, 'wise men;' as those of Egypt (Gen. 41:8), and of Babylon (Dan. 2:12-13). Hence we render μάγοι, the followers of their arts, 'wise men' (Matt. 2:1). Among the Egyptians they were divided into two sorts, חֲרָטְמִים and מְכַשְׁפִּים (Exod. 7:11); the head of one sort in the days of Moses being probably Jannes, and of the other Jambres (2 Tim. 3:8). We call them 'magicians and sorcerers.' Among the Babylonians there is mention of these, and two sorts more are added to them, namely, אֲשָׁפִים and כְּשָׁדִים (Dan. 2:2). Of the difference and distinction among these we shall treat afterwards. From this practice of the generality of priests did קָהֵן come to signify 'to soothsay' or 'divine.'

THE PRIESTS OF EGYPT

קָהֵן is then a priest; and he who was first called so in the Scripture, probably in the world, was Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18). On what account he was so called shall be afterwards declared. Sometimes, though rarely, it is applied to express a priest of false gods; as of Dagon (1 Sam. 5:5); of Egypt (Gen. 41:45), 'Joseph married the daughter of Poti-pherah, אֵן קָהֵן—'priest of On,' that is, of Heliopolis, the chief seat of the Egyptian religious worship. Nor is there any colour why the word should here be rendered 'prince,' as it is, אֲרִי, by the Targum—the Latin is 'sacerdos,' and the LXX. ἱερεὺς—for the dignity of priests, especially of those who were eminent among them, was no less at that time in Egypt, and other parts also of the world, than was that of princes of the second sort; yea, we shall consider instances afterwards in which the kingly and





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priestly offices were conjoined in the same person, although none ever had the one by virtue of the other but upon special reason. It was therefore, as by Pharaoh intended, an honour to Joseph to be married to the daughter of the priest of On; for the man, according to their esteem, was wise, pious, and honourable, seeing the wisdom of the Egyptians at that time consisted principally in the knowledge of the mysteries of their religion, and from their excellency therein were they exalted and esteemed honourable. Nor can it be pleaded, in bar to this exposition, that Joseph would not marry the daughter of an idolatrous priest, for all the Egyptians were no less idolatrous than their priests, and he might as soon convert one of their daughters to the true God as one of any other; which no doubt he did, whereon she became a matriarch in Israel. In other places, where, by כֹהֵן, an idolatrous priest is intended, the Targum renders it by כּוּמָרָא; 'comara,' whence are chemarims. Yet the Syriac translator of the Epistle to the Hebrews calls a priest and an high priest, even when applied to Christ, כּוּמָרָא and רַב כּוּמָרָא, though elsewhere in the New Testament he uses כְּהָנָא, 'chahana,' constantly. The reason for this I have declared elsewhere.



A PRINCELY TITLE



It is confessed that this name is sometimes used to signify secondary princes, those of a second rank or degree, but is never once applied to a chief, supreme prince, or a king, though he that is so was sometimes, by virtue of some special warrant, cohen also. The Jews, therefore, after the Targum, offer violence to the text (Ps. 110:4), where they would have Melchizedek to be called a cohen because he was a prince. But it is said expressly he was a king, of which rank none is, on the account of his office, ever called cohen; but to those of a second rank it is sometimes accommodated: 'Ira the Jairite was לְדָוִד לְרֹבֵל,'—'a chief ruler,' say we, 'about David' (2 Sam. 20:26). A priest he was not, nor could be; for, as Kimchi on the place observes, he is called the 'cohen of David,' but a priest was not a priest to one man, but to all Israel. So David's sons are said to be cohanim: וּבְנֵי דָוִד כְּהָנִים הָיוּ—'And the sons of David were cohanim' (2 Sam. 8:18); that is, 'princes,' though the Vulgate renders it 'sacerdotes.' So also Job 12:19, we translate it 'princes.' And in those places the Targum uses רַבָּא,





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‘rabba;’ the LXX sometimes ἀλλάρχης, ‘a principal courtier;’ and sometimes συνετός, ‘a counsellor.’ It is, then, granted that princes were called כְּהֹנִים, but not properly, but by way of allusion, with respect to their dignity; for the most ancient dignity was that of the priesthood. And the same name is therefore used metaphorically to express especial dignity: תְּהִי־לִי מִמְלֶכֶת כְּהֹנִים—‘And ye shall be to me a kingdom of priests’ (Exod. 19:6), speaking of the whole people. This Peter renders βασιλειον ἱεράτευμα—‘A kingly’ (or ‘royal’) ‘priesthood’ (1 Pet. 2:9). The name of the office is כְּהֹנִה (Exod. 40:15), ἱεράτευμα, ‘pontificatus, sacerdotium,’ ‘the priesthood.’ Allowing, therefore, this application of the word, we may inquire what is the first proper signification of it. I say, therefore, that כֹּהֵן, ‘cohen,’ is properly θύτης, ‘a sacrificer;’ nor is it otherwise to be understood or expounded, unless the abuse of the word be obvious, and a metaphorical sense necessary.

MELCHIZEDEK—THE FIRST PRIEST

He who is first mentioned as vested with this office is Melchizedek: וְהוּא כֹהֵן לְאֵל עֶלְיוֹן—‘And he was a priest to the most high God’ (Gen. 14:18). The Targumists make a great difference in rendering the word כֹּהֵן. Where it intends a priest of God properly, they retain it, כֹּהֵן and כֹּהֵנָא; where it is applied to a prince or ruler, they render it by רַבָּא, ‘rabba;’ and where an idolatrous priest, by כּוּמְרָא. But in this matter of Melchizedek they are peculiar. In this place they use מְשַׁמֵּשׁ, ‘meshamesh:’ וְהוּא מְשַׁמֵּשׁ קֳדָם אֵל עֶלְיוֹן—‘And he was a minister before the high God.’ And by this word they express the ministry of the priests: וְהָיָה דְקָרִיבִין לְפָנֵי יְיָ כֹּהֲנֵי דְקָרִיבִין—‘The priests who draw nigh to minister before the Lord’ (Exod. 19:22); whereby it is evident that they understood him to be a sacred officer, or a priest to God. But in Psalm 110:4, where the same word occurs again to the same purpose, they render it by רַבָּא, ‘a prince;’ or great ruler: ‘Thou art a great ruler like Melchizedek:’ which is a part of their open corruption of that psalm, out of a design to apply it to David; for the author of that Targum lived after they knew full well how the prophecy in that psalm was in our books and by Christians applied to the Messiah, and how the ceasing of their law and worship was from thence invincibly proved in this epistle. This made them maliciously pervert the words in their paraphrase,



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although they durst not violate the sacred text itself. But the text is plain, 'Melchizedek was cohen to the high God;—'a priest,' or one that was called to the office of solemn sacrificing to God; for he that offers not sacrifices to God is not a priest to him, for this is the principal duty of his office, from which the whole receives denomination. That he offered sacrifices, those of the church of Rome would prove from these words, הוֹצִיא לֶחֶם וַיַּיִן—'He brought forth bread and wine' (Gen. 14:18). But neither the context nor the words will give them countenance herein; nor if they could prove what they intend would it serve their purpose. Coming forth to meet Abraham (as our apostle expounds this passage, Heb. 7), he brought forth bread and wine, as a supply for the relief and refreshment of himself and his servants, supposing them weary of their travel. So dealt Barzillai the Gileadite with David and his men in the wilderness (2 Sam. 17:27–9). They brought out necessary provision for them, for they said, 'The people are hungry, and weary, and thirsty, in the wilderness?' And Gideon punished them of Succoth and Penuel for not doing the like (Judg. 8:5–8, 13–17). But the aim of these men is to reflect some countenance on their pretended sacrifice of the mass; which yet is not of bread and wine, for before the offering they suppose them to be quite changed into the substance of flesh and blood. The weakness of this pretense shall be elsewhere more fully declared. At present it may suffice that הוֹצִיא is no sacred word, or is never used to express the offering of any thing to God. Besides, if it were an offering he brought forth, it was a מִנְחָה, or 'meat-offering,' with a נֶסֶךְ, or 'drink-offering,' being of bread and wine. Now, this was only an acknowledgment of God the Creator as such, and was not an immediate type of the sacrifice of Christ; which was represented by them alone which, being made by blood, included a propitiation in them. But that Melchizedek was by office a sacrificer appears from Abraham delivering up to him מַעֲשֵׂר מְכַל, 'the tenth of all' (Gen. 14:20), that is, as our apostle interprets the place, τὰν ἀκροθιμίωον, 'of the spoils' he had taken. מַעֲשֵׂר is a sacred word, and denotes God's portion according to the law. So also those who had only the light of nature, and it may be some little fame of what was done in the world of old, whilst God's institutions were of force among men, did devote and sacrifice the tenth of the spoils they took in war.



THE OFFICE OF PRIESTHOOD

So Camillus framed his vow to Apollo when he went to destroy the city of Veil: 'By your leadership, Pythian Apollo, and roused by your divine will, I proceed to destroy the city of the Veii, and to you I vow the tenth part of the spoils.' (Liv., lib. 5. cap. 21).

The like instances occur in other authors. Ἀκροθίνια is not used for the spoils themselves anywhere but in this place. In other authors, according to the derivation of the word, as it signifies the top or uppermost part of an heap, it is used only for that part or portion of spoils taken in war which was devoted and made sacred: Εἴτε δὴ ἀκροθίνια ταῦτα καταγιεῖν θεῶν ὀτεωδὴ (Herod. lib. 1. cap. 86). And again, Πρῶτα μὲν νυν τοῖσι θεοῖσι ἐξείλον ἀκροθίνια (lib. 8. cap. 121); 'They took out the dedicated spoils for the gods.' And the reason why our apostle uses the word for the whole spoils, whence a tenth was given to Melchizedek, is, because the whole spoil was sacred and devoted to God, whence an honorary tenth was taken for Melchizedek, as the priests had afterwards out of the portion of the Levites; for all Levi was now to be tithed in Abraham. Among those spoils there is no question but there were many clean beasts meet for sacrifice; for in their herds of cattle consisted the principal parts of the riches of those days, and these were the principal spoils of war (see Num. 31:32–3). And because Saul knew that part of the spoils taken in lawful war was to be given for sacrifices to God, he made that his pretense of saving the fat cattle of the Amalekites, contrary to the express command of God (1 Sam. 15:15). Abraham therefore delivered these spoils to Melchizedek, as the priest of the most high God, to offer in sacrifice for him. And it may be there was somewhat more in it than the mere pre-eminence of Melchizedek, which was the principal consideration of this, and his being the first and only priest in office, by virtue of especial call from God—namely, that Abraham himself, coming immediately from the slaughter of many kings and their numerous army, was not yet ready or prepared for this sacred service; for even among the heathens they would abstain from their sacred offices after the shedding of blood, until they were, one way or other, purified to their own satisfaction. So in the poet, 'You, father, take in your hand our holy things, our ancestral gods; coming from such a great war and fresh slaughter, it is a sin for me to touch them, until I have washed myself in a living stream.' (Virg. Aeneid. 2:717).





THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST

A PRIEST IS A SACRIFICER

The matter is yet made more evident by the solemn election of a priesthood of old among the people of God, or the church in the wilderness. Sacrificing from the foundation of the world had been up to this time left at liberty. Every one who was called to perform any part of solemn religious worship was allowed to discharge that duty also. But it pleased God, in the reducing of his church into an especial peculiar order, to represent in and by it more conspicuously what he would afterwards really effect in Jesus Christ, to erect among them a peculiar office of priesthood. And although this respected in general τὰ πρὸς τὸν θεόν, all things that were to be done with God on the behalf of the people, yet the especial work and duty belonging to it was sacrificing. The institution of this office we have Exodus 28, whereof afterwards. And herein an enclosure was made of sacrificing to the office of the priests; that is, so soon as such an office there was by virtue of especial institution. And these two things belonged to them: (1.) That they were sacrificers; and, (2.) That they only were so: which answers all that I intend to evince from this discourse, namely, that a priest is a sacrificer. Whereas, therefore, it is in prophecy foretold that the Messiah should be a priest, and he is said so to be, the principal meaning of it is, that he should be a sacrificer, one that had right and was called to offer sacrifice to God. This was that for which he was principally and properly called a priest, and by his undertaking so to be, an enclosure of sacrificing is made to himself alone.

This is the general notion of a priest amongst all men throughout the world; and a due consideration of this is of itself sufficient to discharge all the vain imaginations of the Socinians about this office of Christ, whereof we shall treat afterwards.

