

Justification by Faith Alone: The Perspectives of William Kiffen and John Owen

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INTRODUCTION

All theology is historical theology. That is to say, all human attempts to make sense of God and his revelation of himself and his ways in Scripture are done, as one of my teachers put it, by particular people who lived in particular times and who thought in particular ways. That simple (but not simplistic) observation opens up vistas as we study various aspects of the church's past. It allows us to see how brothers and sisters in the past struggled both to make sense of the Bible and also to apply it in their contexts. As we observe them doing this—seeing both their victories and their defeats—we can better learn what it means to be faithful to the Lord in our day.

On the eve of the 500th celebration of the start of the Protestant Reformation, it is very appropriate that we think together about the great bedrock of the Protestant faith—the doctrine of justification by faith alone—*sola fide*. Sinners are declared to be in a right standing before God, the holy Judge, not on the basis of anything they have done or ever would accomplish. They have nothing good to offer God in themselves. Everything good had to be done

for us *extra nos* (to use one of Martin Luther's favorite expressions), outside of us. What we are talking about in this doctrine is memorably defined by the Westminster Shorter Catechism in this theologically-packed manner: "Justification is an act of God's free grace, by which he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone." William Kiffen and John Owen both agreed with this statement.

Both of these men were giants in their own day, non-Conformists who lived long lives—Kiffen was born in 1616 and died in 1701; Owen also was born in 1616 and passed away in 1683. They both provided ecclesiological and theological acumen leadership to the non-establishment movements in England during the tumultuous era of the middle and second half of the seventeenth century. This was the period of the English Civil War, parliament's rule, the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell and his not-so-talented son, Richard, the Restoration era of Charles II (1660-1685) whose reign was marked by increased pressure on non-Conformists, and finally the reign of James II (1685-1688) whose goal was to restore England to Catholicism. Kiffen (the Baptist) and Owen (the Presbyterian-turned-Congregationalist) were, arguably, the two most important non-Conformists leaders of the century.

In this article, I want to explore Kiffen's and Owen's views of justification by faith alone as a means of seeing what contextual forces were at play as they formulated their doctrines. This is a worthy task, especially as they agreed with each other on almost all the contours of this doctrine. In one sense, this makes for a bit of a difficult journey because we aren't going to contrast Kiffen's and Owen's views; instead, we're going to compare and contrast the contexts in which they wrote. In other words, I am asking the question of purpose. What drove these busy men—busy in business, busy with families, busy in pastoring churches and providing leadership to larger ecclesiastical movements—to focus as they did on the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone?

Their context encompassed at least five elements. They were anti-Catholic (i.e., Protestant), anti-Socinian, anti-Antinomian, anti-Arminian (i.e., Calvinistic), and evangelical. These five horizons—sometimes stronger in one than in the other, and sometimes more pressing in one of their lives than at other times—were what they had in mind as they formulated their doctrine of justification by faith alone. Let's look at these contexts a bit.

First was their on-going concern about Catholicism (with its teaching that one would ultimately be justified before the holy God on the basis of faith combined with good works and love, all flowing from an infusion of grace at baptism, and resulting in the reality that one could rarely have assurance of salvation in this life).

A second was a powerful new heresy, Socinianism, which promulgated auto-soterism based on the false teaching that Jesus was not divine but rather gave to humans an example they should strive to follow. Socinianism was a growing concern throughout the seventeenth century, making its presence felt by the 1630s, and becoming more vocal in the 1640s, due in large part to the labors of John Biddle.¹ “By the end of the [1640s] the Socinian threat loomed large in the minds of many English divines,” according to Tim Cooper.²

Antinomianism was the third error they controverted; it was a varied movement, which among other things downplayed the necessity of personal Christian obedience.³ At its core, antinomian adherents, according to Robert McKelvey, “so zealously sought to guard the free grace of God in salvation that they denied faith any involvement at all in the actual justification of sinners.”⁴ Antinomians charged “that the [Puritan] obsession with sanctification and holy duties compromised the Protestant message of free grace and seduced the people of God back into works righteousness and legalism.”⁵

A fourth error Kiffen and Owen opposed was Arminianism. Dewey Wallace notes that there “three different though sometimes overlapping kinds of Arminianism” in England in the seventeenth century. First, there was a liberal brand that foreshadowed Socinianism. The second type was Laudianism, fueled by Charles I’s ascendancy in 1625 and William Laud’s appointment to the archbishopric of Canterbury in 1633.⁶ It was revived after the 1660 Restoration of the monarchy when it “became widespread in the Church of England, with Calvinists, especially after the ejection of many Puritans in 1662, remaining an embattled minority.” The third Arminian group consisted of those on the fringes of the Puritan movement, “freewillers” like the General Baptists and the London pastor, John Goodwin.⁷

Finally, and most significantly of all, Kiffen and Owen shared an evangelical context, meaning that they both believed the gospel of Jesus Christ and thought that apart from someone trusting in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins that person would go to an eternity in hell. This evangelical context was fueled by their common Protestant context.⁸ If we don’t understand

that this was the bedrock reason for their discussions of justification, we will misunderstand them.

I disagree, then, with George Hunsinger who, in an essay on Owen's work on justification critiques him in this way: Owen's "arduous, quasi-scholastic method of disputation," Hunsinger avers, "might drive even the most hardened anti-pietist to yearn wistfully for anything by which the heart might be strangely warmed."⁹ Hunsinger has failed to come to grips with this pastoral thrust in Owen's doctrine of justification.

Catholicism, Socinianism, Antinomianism, Arminianism—these were the four errors Kiffen and Owen chiefly had to combat. What unified their efforts in this *mélange* of various contexts, though, was their pastoral concern. The overriding concern of both Kiffen and Owen was the simple answer to the questioner, What must I do to be saved? They both believed that what one believed and did in this life determined one's eternal destiny.

Our course in the remainder of the article is simple and straightforward. We will first notice how William Kiffen developed his doctrine of justification in a confessional statement in 1644. Second, we will take a quick glance at two confessional statements—the second dependent on the first—in whose production and dissemination both Owen and Kiffen played a part, the first from 1658, the second 1677/1689. Third, we shall consider a lengthy 1677 treatise of John Owen devoted to justification. The thing that animated both Owen and Kiffen in all their theological contexts was not primarily logic or polemics. The unifying factor in all their efforts was the gospel. More than anything, they wanted their readers to go to heaven.

THE FIRST LONDON CONFESSION OF FAITH (1644)

The mid-seventeenth century was not an easy time to be a Baptist, as William Kiffen knew all too well. Baptists were accused of a variety of errors by many Anglicans and some Presbyterians.¹⁰ They accused Baptists of publishing "seditious pamphlets, the tumultuous rising of rude multitudes, the preaching of the cobblers, felt-makers, tailors, grooms, and women; the choosing of any place for God's service but the church; the night-meetings of naked men and women; the licentiousness of spiritual marriages without any legal form," etc.¹¹

This contextual setting has much to do with the publication of the First London Confession in 1644. Though the Confession was issued in the name

of seven Particular Baptist churches in London, it “is generally admitted to have been written under Kiffen’s guiding hand,” according to Paul Fiddes.¹² Here we see Kiffen’s theology laid out in full.

The full title—*The Confession of Faith, of Those Churches Which are Commonly (though Falsly) Called Anabaptists*—reminds us of its goal to distance English Calvinistic Baptists from the continent’s Anabaptists. In addition, the Confession has three major contexts we should note: it was strongly Calvinistic, staunchly opposed to the error of Antinomianism, and gospel-saturated. We will look at each of these three contexts in turn.

In the first place, the Confession is decidedly Calvinistic.¹³ The preface to it laments that Baptists were often charged “both in Pulpit and Print . . . with holding Free-will, Falling away from grace, denying Originall sinne.” Therefore, as Barry White notes, “the leaders of their congregations had determined to publish their *Confession* in order to manifest their substantial agreement with the prevailing forms of Calvinistic orthodoxy.”¹⁴

Its Calvinism is apparent. In his providence, the Confession states “God hath decreed in himselfe from everlasting touching all things, effectually to work and dispose them according to the counsell of his owne will, to the glory of his Name.” It also asserts predestination: “God had in Christ before the foundation of the world, according to the good pleasure of his will, fore-ordained some men to eternall life through Jesus Christ, to the praise and glory of his grace, leaving the rest in their sinne to their just condemnation, to the praise of his Justice.”¹⁵

All persons are born dead spiritually due to original sin. God alone acts to redeem “the elect, which God hath loved with an everlasting love.” These ones are “redeemed, quickened, and saved, not by themselves, neither by their own workes, lest any man should boast himselfe, but wholly and onely by God of his free grace and mercie through Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ Christ died only for these elect ones: Jesus “hath fully performed and suffered all those things by which God, through the blood of that his Crosse in an acceptable sacrifice, might reconcile his elect onely.”¹⁷

Second, Kiffen staunchly opposed the Antinomian error in the Confession. Chapter 26 explicitly denies it. “The same power that converts to faith in Christ,” it says, “the same power carries on the soule still through all the duties, temptations, conflicts, sufferings” and whatever else accompanies the Christian life. Christians have duties they must perform. Chapter 29 further

joins together justification and sanctification as graces of God for his elect. The Confession asserts “That all beleevvers are a holy and sanctified people, and that sanctification is a spirituall grace of the new Covenant, and effect of the love of God.” Kiffen deftly avoids the charge of any antinomian tendencies in his teaching, even though he maintains the absolute sovereignty of God to save his elect through his irresistible working alone.

It’s the third context—the evangelical context—that encompasses the doctrine of justification. What is essential, according to Kiffen, is that persons go to heaven. They can only do this by seeing Jesus and his gospel, and trusting in the Christ portrayed there.¹⁸ Every good—past, present, and future—is found in Christ alone. Believers in Christ now possess peace with God through justification by faith. This the climax of all spiritual good. Christ is the centerpiece of salvation, which is epitomized in justification.¹⁹

Chapter 28 articulates the doctrine of justification: “those that have union with Christ, are justified from all their sinnes, past, present, and to come, by the bloud of Christ; which justification wee conceive to be a gracious and free acquittance of a guiltie, sinfull creature, from all sin by God, through the satisfaction that Christ hath made by his death; and this applyed in the manifestation of it through faith.” Christ’s blood, his satisfaction on the cross, is the ground of justification. This justification consists fundamentally in the remission of sin.

The next chapter displays the evangelical and pastoral heart of this doctrine. Justification is not an esoteric belief to be occasionally dusted off for debate. Rather, it’s the life of the Christian and the message of Christians to a lost world:

the tenders of the Gospel to the conversion of sinners, is absolutely free, no way requiring, as absolutely necessary, any qualifications, preparations, terrors of the Law, or preceding Ministry of the Law, but onely and alone the naked soule, as a sinner and ungodly to receive Christ, as crucified, dead, and buried, and risen againe, being made a Prince and a Saviour for such sinners (ch. 25).²⁰

The 1644 London Confession highlights the Arminian, Antinomian, and evangelical context of William Kiffen. Supremely his hope was in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the substitutionary labor of the Lord dying in the place of his people, to be received by faith. This was what motivated Kiffen as he

protected this precious, life-giving, zeal-producing doctrine from Arminian and Antinomian encroachments.

OWEN AND KIFFEN IN THE SAVOY DECLARATION AND THE 1689 CONFESSION

Next we shall briefly note a text that John Owen and William Kiffen had in common: the Savoy Declaration of Faith of 1658 and the Second London Confession of 1677 (issued in 1689).²¹ Two introductory matters are relevant. In the first place, they both mirrored almost exactly the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith. Both the Congregationalists and the Baptists wanted to distance themselves from various sectarian groups, showing they were in line with each other and agreed in the main with historic Christian and Protestant doctrine.²² Savoy used Westminster, which was published over a decade prior to the latter's composition. And the Second London Confession used both of them. In the second place, Owen was the primary author of Savoy. We see his theology here, especially where Savoy differs from Westminster.²³ And Kiffen was a signatory of the Baptist Confession, approving of its theology.²⁴

Westminster's theology of justification was decidedly Protestant, but Robert Letham notes the Assembly's major concern was less with Catholicism and Arminianism and more with Antinomianism.²⁵ Alan Strange concurs: "the main theological error among Protestants, at least as far as the Assembly was concerned, and which it determined to oppose, was antinomianism."²⁶

This may account for one of the main additions that Savoy and the Baptists made to the Westminster Confession. They both added chapter 20, "Of the Gospel and the Extent of Grace Thereof," in four paragraphs. After the fall into sin, they asserted, "God was pleased to give unto the elect the promise of Christ . . . in this promise the gospel, as to the substance of it, was revealed, and [is] therein effectual for the conversion and salvation of sinners" (20.1). The gospel-centeredness of Savoy and the Baptists is clear.

Chapter 11 in each of the three confessions—"Of Justification"—consists in six points, among which there is almost total agreement. There are, though, a couple of significant dissimilarities. The first concerns exactly what was imputed to believers in their justification. Savoy and the Second London Confession remark that justification occurs "by imputing Christ's active obedience to the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for

their whole and sole righteousness,” clarifying Westminster’s statement that this occurred merely “by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them.” There is development after Westminster.

Two factors seem to account for the change. First, there was a development, as Carl Trueman has noted, in theologians’ and pastors’ abilities in articulating their theology due to growth in the formulation of covenant theology, specifically the *pactum salutis* and the particular role of Christ as Mediator of the covenant of grace. This accounted for some of the new stress upon Christ’s active and passive obedience being imputed to believers.²⁷ Second, this period had seen a growth in Socinianism, along with its denial of Christ’s deity and federal headship. In response, both Savoy and the Baptists proclaimed that the only hope for sinners was that Christ had lived a perfect life for the elect and this active obedience was accounted for their gross disobedience. This active obedience, along with the Lord’s obedience in dying for sinners the righteous for the unrighteous—the misnamed “passive obedience”—were both counted to the elect. By this deft stroke one of Socinianism’s chief teachings was overturned.

The second change is a minor one probably directed towards the antinomians. The fourth paragraph in Westminster, which was certainly directed against the wrong-headed doctrine of eternal justification, said: “God did, from all eternity, decree to justify the elect; and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins and rise again for their justification; nevertheless they are not justified until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.”²⁸ Savoy and Second London add one word—“personally”—so that we are told that prior to the Spirit’s application of Christ to believers “they are not justified *personally*,” presumably stressing the individual’s need to personally exercise faith in order to be justified, even though one might not be able to conceptualize how this integrates with God’s eternal decree to justify the elect.

The two additions to both Savoy and the Second London Confession, then—along with the addition of the chapter on the gospel—demonstrate once again Owen’s and Kiffen’s commitment to guarding the gospel from wrong-headed assaults. Socinianism and antinomianism were grave errors because they impinged on the life-giving message of the promise of life in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

JOHN OWEN AND JUSTIFICATION

As Crawford Gribben has reminded us, the latter years of Owen were among his most productive ones.²⁹ In 1677, six years prior to his death, Owen published his *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith, through the Imputation of the Righteousness of Christ; Explained, Confirmed, and Vindicated*. Justification, faith, imputation—these are key ideas Owen circles around to time and again over the course of 562 pages in the first printing in 1677 and approximately 400 pages in the nineteenth-century Goold edition.

Owen's context is essential to understand the contours of this work. Dewey Wallace reminds us how precarious the latter seventeenth century was for conservative Protestants. He comments that “the emergence of a new intellectual world that challenged many of the traditional religious assumptions of an earlier time was particularly relevant to the shaping of English Calvinism during the Restoration and its immediate aftermath.” Specifically, Wallace notes several “aspects of later seventeenth-century culture in Restoration England that were religiously unsettling were the demand for greater rationality, new discoveries in science (or ‘natural philosophy’), awareness of other religions, scoffing at religion, denial of such a central pillar of orthodox Christianity as the doctrine of the Trinity (often referred to at the time by a kind of shorthand as ‘Socinianism’), Deism, and atheism.”³⁰

Owen himself pinpoints three errors that will fall under his gaze: Catholicism, Socinianism, and Antinomianism.³¹ We should note, however, the issue which actually serves as the driving force of the entire treatise. This is Owen's evangelical context. *The* question, *the* pressing issue, Owen asks and answers in this work is, How can a desperately wicked sinner hope to stand before the holy God at the final day? Everything in the treatise—whether it's his eighty pages of biblical exposition, his interaction with the Catholic controversialist Robert Bellermino, his lengthy interaction with the thought of Faustus Socinus, or his pressing the claims of obedience upon those who have been justified—everything is related to this question of eternity for Owen. How can a sinner go to heaven, and how can he have certainty in this life that he will go there?

Michael Haykin and Matthew Barrett have recently helped us understand the Socinians, who “viewed the imputation of Christ's righteousness, which Reformed theologians like Owen believed to consist of Christ's active obedience (i.e., his fulfilling the law on our behalf) and passive obedience (i.e.,

his taking the penalty for our sin), as an ‘impossible’ doctrine.”³² Cooper helpfully notes the reason that Owen vehemently defended orthodoxy from Socinianism:

For Owen, his nonconformist upbringing combined with his university learning and his experience of encroaching Laudianism at Oxford to forge an understanding of doctrine that precluded anything that might look like human merit in the process of salvation. He did this in a phase of intense political developments, at a time when Laudian influence in England peaked and then receded [in the latter 1640s] ... at just that moment the new fact of human autonomy—the Socinians—began to emerge as an increasingly significant marker in the mind of Owen and others of a growing independence in human thought and aspiration ... this is not to reduce Owen’s soteriology to mere pragmatism, only to recognize that he crafted his belief in a particular context under identifiable pressures and with discernable aims.³³

Haykin and Barrett also point out that for Catholicism “justification, regeneration, and sanctification were intertwined so that justification was understood not as an instantaneous legal, forensic declaration, but as a process of inner renewal and transformation.”³⁴ Owen had much to do to overthrow their polemic.

The bulk of Owen’s book consists of twenty chapters. The first six chapters are a general overview of the nature of faith and justification. Chapter seven turns to a discussion and defense of imputation, which Owen considers the heart of the biblical and Protestant doctrine. This—along with a related discussion of faith, the relationship between the covenants in redemptive history, and the necessity of personal obedience in the redeemed—covers chapters seven through fifteen. Chapters sixteen through eighteen—totaling almost eighty pages, or twenty percent of the entire treatise—are a detailed biblical exposition of justification by faith alone through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. The treatise concludes with two chapters, the first of which answers remaining objections to Owen’s doctrine. The final chapter proves how essential Owen believed obedience was for justified Christians; here he has a thirty-page-long discussion of the relationship between the apostles Paul and James on the matter of justification. This reminds us how dangerous Owen felt the Antinomian threat was to evangelical living.

We are not going to look at these twenty chapters. Instead, we shall notice Owen's two lengthy prefaces to *Justification by Faith*. In these two prefaces Owen answers our Why? question, telling us exactly why he was motivated to write this lengthy treatise.

In the first preface, "To the Reader," Owen proclaims that the seemingly-intricate doctrine of justification in reality is exceedingly practical. "It is the practical direction of the consciences of men, in their application unto God by Jesus Christ for deliverance from the curse due unto the apostate state, and peace with him, with the influence of the way thereof unto universal gospel obedience," Owen writes, "that is alone to be designed in the handling of this doctrine."³⁵ That is the whole point of this 400 page treatise! Hunsinger's earlier-noted critique of Owen seems to have failed to deal with this pastoral thrust in Owen's work on justification.³⁶ The relief of men's burdened consciences is the supreme goal, then, of the entire work, along with Owen's corresponding concern that those who are forgiven should strive for "universal gospel obedience." Indeed, Owen notes how often skeptics charge this doctrine "with an un-friendly aspect towards the necessity of personal holiness, good works, and all gospel obedience."³⁷ Catholics and Socinians continually accuse Protestants of this, even though the entire Reformation encompassed the effort to aid "the souls of men, being set at liberty from their bondage unto innumerable superstitious fears and observances, utterly inconsistent with true gospel obedience, and directed into the ways of peace with God through Jesus Christ, were made fruitful in real holiness."³⁸ Burdened sinners' fears of judgment can only be relieved by someone outside of themselves saving them; this is the burden of Owen's treatise.

The overarching purpose of relieving burdened consciences continues in the second preface, the sixty-four page-long "General Considerations." Having noted that the twin ultimate goals of justification are the glory of God and the obedience of Christians, Owen urges several reflections regarding this doctrine, which we shall summarize in three ways.

First, only justification *sola fide* can assure of salvation. He says his first consideration is "the proper relief of the conscience of a sinner pressed and perplexed with a sense of the guilt of sin."³⁹ Owen's evangelical emphasis follows in his discussion where he recounts the burden of wondering how one can be forgiven, and realizing that it can only be by what one does himself or what Christ does for one; it cannot be both.⁴⁰ Owen argues that "in no

other evangelical truth is the whole of our obedience more concerned; for the foundation, reasons, and motives of all our duty towards God are contained therein.” That gets to the heart of justification’s conscience-assuaging significance. “To satisfy the minds and consciences of men,” Owen avers, “is this doctrine to be taught.”⁴¹ We will not understand Owen aright if we fail to see his reason for controverting justification. It is the only way one can know he will go to heaven.⁴²

Second, Owen observes that God is holy and we are all sinners. The one with whom we have to do is the holy Judge. Catholic teaching does nothing to relieve our consciences before God the Judge.⁴³ In denying imputation, Socinians offer no solace to those who are aware of the depths of their own sin.⁴⁴ In fact, Owen teaches that a large part of justification is holding to imputation. Imputation, he declares, is “a commutation between Christ and believers, as unto sin and righteousness; that is, in the imputation of their sins unto him, and of his righteousness unto them.”⁴⁵ This is no an esoteric teaching; after all, Luther and others found solace here.⁴⁶ Without believing it, one cannot have assurance of forgiveness before God. The imputation of our sin to Christ and his righteousness to us “is represented unto us in the Scripture as the principal object of our faith,—as that whereon our peace with God is founded.”⁴⁷

Third, Owen stresses Christian obedience. Socinians argue that Christians will be lax in righteousness due to a belief in imputation. Their root problem is their commitment to follow their straying logic instead of the teaching of Scripture, even though the Bible is on both truths—i.e., that imputation and the requirement for evangelical obedience are true, even if we can’t understand how.⁴⁸

What matters, Owen declares, is not the word (“imputation”) but the clear teaching of the Bible. Reiterating again the evangelical thrust of the entire treatise, he announces that there is only one way for men to have faith “when they come to die, and . . . [when they] are exercised with temptations whilst they live.” “The substance of what is pleaded for [in the entire book, is] that men should renounce all confidence in themselves, and every thing that may give countenance thereunto; betaking themselves unto the grace of God by Christ alone for righteousness and salvation.”⁴⁹ The imputation of the perfect righteousness of Jesus matters because heaven is in the balance.

Owen’s close to the General Considerations shows the weight he attaches

to the doctrine. Echoing John Calvin's teaching that justification is the main hinge on which true religion turns, Owen remarks that "the doctrine of justification gave the first occasion to the whole work of reformation, and was the main hinge whereon it turned."⁵⁰ Justification as he understood it—based on the imputation of Christ's righteousness and the corresponding necessity of evangelical obedience—was the centerpiece of the Protestant Reformation precisely because it was the only truth able to ease men's consciences before God.⁵¹ Eternity awaits all persons, and outside of Christ's righteousness only God's wrath awaits us all.⁵²

CONCLUSION

Perhaps Crawford Gribben is correct and John Owen's life was ultimately an experience of defeat. Certainly both William Kiffen and John Owen ended their lives not feeling like they had "won." All around them things in the culture and the churches seemed to be drifting further and further away from God and godliness. Yet, they continued teaching justification by faith alone as the only hope for sinners. May we do the same, brothers and sisters, knowing that the gospel alone is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Whatever goes on around us, eternity is yet to come for each individual.

¹ Dewey D. Wallace Jr., "Anti-Trinitarianism," in *Puritans and Puritanism in Europe and America: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2 (Francis J. Bremer and Tom Webster, eds.; Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO, 2006), 309-10.

² Tim Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 65. He also suggests that in Socinus's scheme, "Men and women were saved by [Christ's] teaching and moral example, not by his death on the Cross. Like any Roman ruler, God had the right to punish sinners but could choose not to use it, so the Cross of Christ was not the basis of forgiveness and reconciliation. For religion to be praiseworthy it had to be a matter of choice, not of an inner inclination or instinct tied to a universal natural law embedded in all people, much less the result of God's own choice and election ... Christ was merely a historical figure who revealed a new way" (Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter*, 64).

³ Antinomians, as Paul Schaefer points out, were "preachers who used the rhetoric of sola gratia in such a way as to turn it into a teaching of absolute passivity, whereby little or no discussion of sanctification formed part of the discourse on the life of the Christians" (Paul R. Schaefer Jr., *The Spiritual Brotherhood: Cambridge Puritans and the Nature of Christian Piety* [Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2011], 244). In addition, John Spurr notes that, "The 'antinomianism' mentioned by several contemporaries was a strain of mystical puritan theology and piety. . . . In place of the arid piety of constantly searching for signs of election, they offered a bolder confidence in the mercy and goodness of God. They were willing," he insists, "to 'listen to the Spirit' and critical of those they saw as 'formalists'" (John Spurr, *The Post-Reformation: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain 1603-1714* [London: Pearson, 2006], 107). "At times, antinomian theorists were so extravagant in their claims for the effects of divine grace and the inhabitation of God's spirit that they implied that believers were in some sense rendered perfect, indeed divine, in this life" (David Como,

- "Antinomianism," in *Puritans and Puritanism in Europe and America* [Bremer and Webster, eds., 2:306].
- 4 Robert J. McKelvey, "'That Error and Pillar of Antinomianism': Eternal Justification," in Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones, eds., *Drawn into Controversy: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates Within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 239-40; however, David Como might be correct that "antinomian" was "primarily a hostile term of abuse, often used imprecisely, sloppily or maliciously for polemical purposes" (David Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004], 33, in McKelvey, "'That Error and Pillar of Antinomianism,'" 224).
 - 5 David R. Como, "Radical Puritanism, c. 1558-1660," in John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 249-50. "Antinomians thus positioned themselves as the only true defenders of free grace at a moment when many English Puritans and Calvinists were fretting over the ascendancy of churchmen who were seen as crypto-popish works-mongers (which was apparently what gave the movement traction)" (Como, "Radical Puritanism," 251).
 - 6 There was a very real concern that Laud was seeking to turn the Church away from its hard-won Reformed heritage. As Kevin Sharpe notes, "significant contemporaries did perceive Laud to be the spawn of a papist and an Arminian threat and did fear dangerous innovations in the Caroline church" (Kevin Sharpe, "Religion, Rhetoric, and Revolution in Seventeenth-Century England," *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 57 [1994]: 263, in Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter*, 36).
 - 7 Dewey D. Wallace Jr., "Arminianism," in *Puritans and Puritanism in Europe and America* (Bremer and Webster, eds.; 2:312-13). He perhaps overstates his case in saying that "John Owen made the refutation of Arminianism his theological lifework" (Wallace, "Arminianism," 313).
- We might add one more context. Both Kiffen and Owen lived much of their adult lives as dissenters from the established church of their nation. These two monumental figures—as different as they were in background, education, and personality, and even though Owen never completed his move from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism by becoming a Baptist—were united (at least for decades) as religious outsiders in their country. One thing that meant was that they had regularly to distance themselves from the various sects that were rampant in the seventeenth century, in a world turned upside down, when sects like "Fifth Monarchy Men, Ranters, Baptists, Quakers, and others – 'swarmed,'" according to Spurr, *The Post-Reformation*, 131.
- 8 As heirs of the Protestant Reformation, Kiffen and Owen would agree with the views of Martin Luther and John Calvin on justification. Carl Trueman notes that "On justification, Calvin is at one with Luther both in the anti-Pelagian framework within which he understands salvation and in the punctiliar, declaratory nature of justification as being by the imputation of Christ's righteousness through faith" (Carl R. Trueman, "Justification," in David M. Whitford, ed., *T & T Clark Companion to Reformation Theology* [London: Bloomsbury, 2012], 66).
 - 9 George Hunsinger, "Justification and Mystical Union with Christ: Where Does Owen Stand?" in *The Ashgate Companion to John Owen's Theology* (Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones, eds.; Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 204.
 - 10 Stephen Wright notes that "The growth of sects and antinomianism was a recurrent theme in the [Presbyterian Westminster] Assembly between July and September 1644; it was revealed that even some ministers who had been examined and passed 'prove Anabaptists and antinomians,' and in the discussion which followed this disturbing news, the vote on whether dipping be permitted as a baptismal form resulted in a tie. The debate was conducted with Baptists in mind" (Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603-1649* [Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2006], 129).
 - 11 In William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought: With Special Reference to Baptists in Britain and North America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 27. Barry White has suggested that mid-seventeenth century English people feared the radical ideas—political and religious—that seemed to be tearing their country apart. "Many people felt profoundly insecure during this period and those, such as the Baptists, who challenged the most vital traditions of Church and State increased their unease," he observes. "Infant baptism had tied church and community neatly together. Believer's baptism sundered the church, the company of the committed, both from other groups with churchly pretensions and from men's 'natural' social context – the parish" (B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* [London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983], 26). The Levellers, for instance, had successfully recruited quite a few General Baptists to their cause. In the public's eye, there was no difference between General and Particular Baptists, so the latter were also viewed suspiciously. This was such a concern to Kiffen that in 1649 he led a group that petitioners to the House of Commons, insisting "that our meetings are not at all to intermeddle with the ordering or altering civil government (which we humbly and submissively leave to the supreme power),

- but solely for the advancement of the Gospel” (White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 76).
- ¹² Paul S. Fiddes, Foreword, in Larry J. Kreitzer, *William Kiffen and his World (Part 1)* (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, Oxford, 2010), xi.
- ¹³ Collier notes that the statement explicitly denied such Arminian and General Baptist doctrines as free will, losing one’s salvation, and the denial of the devastating effects of original sin on unbelievers (Jay T. Collier, in James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009], 53).
- ¹⁴ B. R. White, “The Doctrine of the Church in the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 19, no. 2 (1968): 571. Almost fifty years later, in 1692, Kiffen along with three others identified the reason that called forth this influential Baptist confessional statement. They were charged with making “the Truth of Christ contemptible,” especially by being “corrupt in the Doctrines of the Gospel.” The Confession was written to show the error of the charge (William Kiffen, et al, *A Serious Answer to a Late Book Stiled, A Reply to Mr. Robert Steed’s Epistle concerning Singing*. [London: n.p., 1692], 16-17). All was not well in many people’s minds over the publication of the 1644 Confession. Many were alarmed over Baptists’ “breach with ordinary rites of passage” in the publication of the Confession. “Daniel Featley, long an apologist for the Church of England, published, in 1645, an account of the Baptists based partly on notes of a disputation he had undertaken against William Kiffin three years earlier. Called *The Dippers Dipt*, the book identified the new body with the continental Anabaptists and tarred them all with the brush of the crimes of Munster. The volume was extremely popular, reaching a sixth edition by 1651. Likewise, Thomas Edwards, a Presbyterian spokesman, was severely critical of the Baptists in his work *Gangraena* (1646), an anatomy of contemporary sects. Kiffin, according to a correspondent whom Edwards quoted, ‘hath by his enticing words seduced and gathered a schismatical rabble of deluded children, servants and people without either parents’ or masters’ consent’” (David W. Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* [Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010], 48).
- ¹⁵ *First London Baptist Confession*, article 3, in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1969), 157.
- ¹⁶ *First London Baptist Confession*, article 5, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 158.
- ¹⁷ *First London Baptist Confession*, article 17, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 160.
- ¹⁸ Chapters 21 through 32 are the central section of the 53-chapter long statement of faith. They have no known source outside of the First London Confession, surely displaying Kiffen’s thought. As Barry White has pointed out the key twelve articles (articles 21 to 32), which are an articulation of “the life of the believer as one of God’s elect,” have no known literary source. Kiffen apparently authored these points which “contained or implied the five points of limited atonement, unconditional election, total depravity, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints, although unconditional election had been asserted somewhat earlier” (White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 64). Murray Tolmie suggests Kiffen was the principal author the Confession, as seen by his being the first signature to the document (Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London 1616-1649* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977], 57-58).
- ¹⁹ A “new feature in 1644 was the section of twelve articles (XXI-XXXII) dealing with the life the believer as one of God’s elect. It is evident from these (for which no literary source has yet been discovered) that for the men of 1644 the other most significant theological event since 1596 [the year of the publication of the Separatists’ *A True Confession*], alongside the restoration of believer’s baptism, had been the Synod of Dort where the new definition of Calvinistic orthodoxy had been promulgated. The twelve articles of 1644 contained or implied the five points of limited atonement, unconditional election, total depravity, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints, although unconditional election had been asserted somewhat earlier. This whole section . . . was introduced . . . by men who took the Calvinistic orthodoxy of their day with great seriousness” (White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 64).
- ²⁰ Tom Nettles sees the influence of John Goodwin—both linguistically and methodologically—in this statement, which is significant given the role that the Arminian Goodwin’s preaching had on Kiffen’s experience of assurance. See Tom Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity, Vol. One: Beginnings in Britain* (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2005), 130-31, 142-43). Michael Haykin says that Goodwin was used by God to bring Kiffen to salvation (Michael A. G. Haykin, *Kiffen, Knollys and Keach: Rediscovering Our English Baptist Heritage* [Leeds: Reformation Today Trust, 1996], 43). We have no indication that Kiffen was reflecting on the so-called Antinomian Controversy in colonial Boston some seven years earlier. But if so, he had just agreed with the beleaguered John Cotton who barely survived the controversy unscathed, and whom many of his fellow pastors struggled to trust afterwards.
- ²¹ White notes that “The easing of persecution in the late 1670s enabled the Calvinistic Baptists in 1677 as

- a community 'in London and the country' to publish their new Confession" (White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 119).
- 22 The preface to the Second London Confession demonstrates this when it says, "finding no defect in this regard in that fixed on by the Assembly, and after them by those of the Congregational way, we did really conclude it best to retain the same order in our confession . . . making use of the very same words with them both, in those articles (which were very many) wherein our faith and doctrine is the same as theirs" ("To the Judicious and Impartial Reader," in Brackney, *Genetic History*, 32).
- 23 For Owen's role at the Savoy conference, see Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (1893; rpt. Boston: Pilgrim, 1960), 349. Walker notes that Savoy added an entirely new chapter, "Of the Gospel, and of the extent of the Grace thereof," chapter. 20. Of this chapter, which the 1689 adopted as its own as well, Walker argues it is "a pleasing token of that readiness, always characteristic of Congregationalism, to hold for the more gracious aspects of the religion of Christ" (Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 351). It seems more likely that in context this new chapter instead represents an attempt to counter the growing threat of hyper-Calvinism among Congregationalists and Baptists, an attempt that would prove prescient in the next century.
- 24 We see this, for example, in that Kiffin was one of seven Particular Baptist pastors who sent out a letter urging Particular Baptist churches to send representatives to the assembly that adopted the Confession (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 238). A question raises itself before we look at these confessions. Why didn't the Baptists just use the 1644 Confession, and its 1646 revision, instead of issuing a new one? Several reasons have been suggested. The First London Confession had been out of print for several years and was hard to come by. Obviously, though it might have initially influenced Baptists greatly, it was not so much a part of their DNA that a new statement would be viewed suspiciously by them (Brackney, *Genetic History*, 31-32; James M. Renihan, *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-1705* [Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008], 17-18). Also, there was the very real desire in the post-Glorious Revolution era of the Act of Toleration for Baptists to show that they were overwhelmingly united with their dissenting brethren the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists by issuing a confession that agreed with these other dissenting denominations (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 236-37). Additionally there was the growing threat of hyper-Calvinism in Particular Baptist church life as evidenced in the need for Kiffin and other London Baptist pastors in 1675 to publish a letter in opposition to one tenet of hyper-Calvinism, the denial of issuing the call to repentance and faith to all persons indiscriminately (see Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach*, 64-65, and Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:137-38).
- 25 Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 251. Letham argues that antinomianism "probably arose due to an excessive stress in Puritanism on self-examination and precise directives for godly living, for 'antinomians offered a relief from the perceived tyranny of puritan practical divinity'" (*Westminster Assembly*, 251 fn. 17, citing Jeffrey K. Jue, "The Active Obedience of Christ and the Westminster Standards," in *Justified in Christ: God's Plan for Us in Justification*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint [Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2007], 110-11). Later he notes that the Assembly had three major foes in view: the Roman doctrine of justification ("There was no place for any element in the believer contributing even in an instrumental sense to his justification. All positions that included inherent righteousness in this sense were excluded" (Letham, *Westminster Assembly* 262), antinomianism's eternal justification, and Arminianism's doctrine of justification (Letham, *Westminster Assembly* 263). Of Arminianism's doctrine, he notes that "contrary to Arminian teaching, faith itself is not imputed, neither is any other evangelical obedience involved. This would simply be another form of the Roman Catholic doctrine, for justification would then be related to something present in the one believing, albeit the consequence of grace" (Letham, *Westminster Assembly* 270).
- 26 Alan D. Strange, "The Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ at the Westminster Assembly," in Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones, eds., *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates Within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 38.
- 27 Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 101-13. "Christ's appointment as mediator in the covenant of redemption means that all his works are those of voluntary condescension in the ordained economy of salvation, not necessary to his being, and as such their significance and value is determined by the covenant which the defining ground of the work of incarnation. In addition, the position of Christ as federal sponsor means that he always acts in a public, not a private or personal capacity, and that strict comparison with any other individual is not legitimate. His whole life, having its causal ground in the covenant of redemption, is that of the sponsor of the covenant of grace, and thus in its entirety it has a significance which embraces all of the objects of the covenant of grace"

- (Trueman, *John Owen*, 110).
- ²⁸ Letham avers that “The insistent theme of the antinomians was that the crucial center of gravity of justification was that the crucial center of gravity of justification was the eternal decree and the historical accomplishment of Christ. To counter this position, which the divines saw would under the doctrine of sanctification, the section goes on to assert that the elect are not *actually* justified until the Holy Spirit applies Christ to them through faith. This means that our receiving Christ in our own life-history is the Archimedean point of justification, not the decree of God in eternity. However, the sovereign decree of God is asserted, and the application of salvation to the elect is maintained. The Confession will have nothing to do with antinomianism; neither will it make concessions to Arminianism” (Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 272). According to Cooper, “Chad van Dixhoorn suggests that Antinomianism was a much greater and more immediate fear in the Assembly even than Catholicism” (Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter*, 198).
- ²⁹ Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 234-235. Unfortunately, other than briefly mentioning Owen’s *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, Gribben does not interact with this work in any substantial way.
- ³⁰ Dewey D. Wallace Jr., *Shapers of English Calvinism, 1660-1714: Variety, Persistence, and Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27, 30.
- ³¹ “The seventeenth century was a period where antinomianism was on the rise, and the pendulum swung hard in the opposite direction and yielded a neonomian direction” (J. V. Fesko, “John Owen on Union with Christ and Justification,” *Themelios* 37.1 [2012]: 8).
- ³² Matthew Barrett and Michael A. G. Haykin, *Owen on the Christian Life: Living for the Glory of God in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 186.
- ³³ Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter*, 222. Cooper also perceptively notes this: “Ironically, both Owen and Baxter shared a concern for excessive human freedom. Owen disliked the autonomy the Arminians and Socinians granted to the human will. Baxter condemned the liberty allowed by the Antinomians, which reflected itself in practical rebellion and disobedience” (Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter*, 223). Even more generally, Wallace has pointed out that even though technically Socinians were doctrinally heterodox on issues like the atonement, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, God’s grace, and original sin, there were other reasons for Owen and others to be alarmed by them. Socinianism’s “rejection of ‘mysteries’ that could not be warranted before the bar of reason has been claimed as a major source of English radicalism, political and religious, throughout the later seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. With its rejection of mysteries it blended with Deism” (Wallace, *Shapers of English Calvinism*, 47-48).
- ³⁴ Barrett and Haykin, *Owen on the Christian Life*, 186. They also note the challenge posed by Arminianism, antinomians’ doctrine of “eternal justification,” and Richard Baxter, though Owen does not address those in *Justification by Faith*. See Barrett and Haykin, *Owen on the Christian Life*, 186-89.
- ³⁵ John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* in *The Works of John Owen* (ed., William H. Goold [1850-1853]; rpt. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965), 5:4. Myers correctly notes that this “work is structured polemically rather than systematically and thus Owen’s attention to any given doctrinal point often is spread over different sections and set within nuanced discussions of different issues and objections” (Stephen G. Myers, “God, Owen, and Justification: The Role of God’s Nature in John Owen’s Doctrine of Justification,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 8, 2 (2016): 70, fn 1).
- ³⁶ However, Hunsinger’s previous comment on Owen’s writing style seems apropos: “No one has accused John Owen of making matters easy for his readers. Every sentence he wrote could be exhausting. A complex syntax, which constantly nested one relative clause within another, time after time within the same sentence, was compounded by his penchant for using three words where one word would do.” See Hunsinger, “Justification and Mystical Union with Christ: Where Does Owen Stand?” 204. On the other hand, Tom Schreiner is surely right to note that “What leaps out at the reader in these writings [of Owen’s *Justification by Faith*] is the pastoral character of Owen’s understanding” (Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015], 70). Similarly Beeke and Jones aver that “It should be remembered that there is a deep pastoral intent in Owen’s writings, especially on the issue of justification” (Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* [Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2012], 493).
- ³⁷ Owen, *Justification by Faith Alone*, in *Works* 5:4.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4-5.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-9.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

- ⁴² Later Owen noted that “In my judgment, Luther spake the truth when he said, *Amisso articulo justificationis, simul amissa est tota doctrina Christiana*,” which means “The loss of the doctrine of justification involves the loss of all Christian doctrine” (Owen, *Justification by Faith Alone*, in *Works* 5:67; the English translation is found in Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 491).
- ⁴³ Owen, *Justification by Faith Alone*, in *Works* 5:14. Beeke and Jones helpfully summarize the Catholic teaching on double justification: “The first justification, according to Rome, is the infusion of grace through baptism, which operates infallibly (*ex opere operato*), whereby original sin is extinguished and the habits of sin are expelled. The second justification is a consequence of the first, namely, justification by good works done is the exercise of the infused habits of grace” (Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 496-97; see Owen, *Justification by Faith Alone*, in *Works* 5:138.) Also note Fesko’s treatment in “John Owen on Union with Christ and Justification,” 14-15.
- ⁴⁴ Owen, *Justification by Faith Alone*, in *Works* 5:21.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 34. Myers summarizes Owen’s teaching here: “For Owen, imputation had two constituent parts. First, imputation involved ascribing, or reckoning, something to someone; and secondly, it involved treating that person as if he possessed the thing in question” (Myers, “God, Owen, and Justification,” 71). Owen stood in common ground with the later-seventeenth-century Reformed tradition here. “Justification was defined in forensic terms as the remission of sin and the imputation of righteousness, all of which in later Reformed theology was set in the context of a federal structure including a covenant of redemption, a covenant of works, and a covenant of grace. Just as the sin of Adam was imputed to all those whom he represented in the covenant of works, on the basis that he was their federal head, so the righteousness of Christ is imputed to all those whom he represents as federal head in the covenant of grace.” “Imputation is at the very heart and center of the Reformed understanding of justification” (A. T. B. McGowan, “Justification and the *ordo salutis*,” in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges* [Bruce L. McCormack, ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006], 153, 154).
- ⁴⁶ Owen, *Justification by Faith Alone*, in *Works* 5:35-40.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 40. Surely, then, Stephen Myers is correct to argue that Owen “offers distinctive insights into how the doctrine of justification is to be located within, and shaped by, a larger dogmatic system. Most specifically, within Owen’s theological system, God’s nature demands that justification include the imputation of Christ’s active obedience” (Myers, “God, Owen, and Justification,” 70).
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 48-49.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 65. For Calvin, see *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed., John T. McNeil, trans., Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.11.1.
- ⁵¹ “Imputation as the formal cause of justification is crucial to Owen’s argument as a whole. For a sinner to stand before God, two things are required: first, his iniquities must be forgiven; and second, he must possess a righteousness that will meet the requirements of God’s justice. Our own inherent righteousness at best is imperfect and cannot meet the demands of God’s law” (Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 500).
- ⁵² Owen, *Works* 5:85.