

Rules for Walking
in Fellowship



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Interest in the Puritans continues to grow, but many people find the reading of these giants of the faith a bit unnerving. This series seeks to overcome that barrier by presenting Puritan books that are convenient in size and unimimidating in length. Each book is carefully edited with modern readers in mind, smoothing out difficult language of a bygone era while retaining the meaning of the original authors. Books for the series are thoughtfully selected to provide some of the best counsel on important subjects that people continue to wrestle with today.

Rules for Walking in Fellowship

John Owen

Edited by
David G. Whitla



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Rules for Walking in Fellowship

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Preface

It takes no great insight to discern that the biblical doctrine of the church has fallen on hard times. Several contemporary trends illustrate this. The church of the living God is no longer respected as “the house of God... the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), but is instead redefined as an “emergent” phenomenon writing its own story. Many people exchange the ministerial authority of godly pastors and elders for the unaccountability of the home church or the well-meaning pursuit of an every-member ministry. They see making a commitment to a particular local congregation by vows of church membership as an antiquated practice at best, and an infringement of Christian liberty at worst.

And yet, ironically, in this present atmosphere there is one aspect of the church that advocates of all these positions generally agree upon: that Christians ought to live in *fellowship* with one another. “Community” is a buzzword that finds ready expression in all parts of Western society, and yet the church is frequently

assumed to be merely a voluntary society that one may drift in or out of, with no strings attached. How curious the assumption that the fellowship of the members of the body of Christ can take place in a dismembered body, eviscerated of the elemental structures of church government, church discipline, and church membership established by its glorious Head! It was not always so. While the pressures mentioned above are perennial enemies of the church, there have always been those in her midst who have called her back to biblical purity in ecclesiastical matters. In seventeenth-century Britain and America, many clergy and laymen showed such zeal for a return to a pure, biblical ecclesiology that they were branded with the nickname “Puritans.” Unlike today’s church-growth gurus, they argued from Scripture that the communion of the saints was not to be divorced from these structures, but rather was dependent upon them. In other words, while the church existed as an organism, it also had an organization—and the two were interdependent.

One who wrote extensively on the subject was John Owen (1616–1683), whose prominence in this movement has frequently earned him the title Prince of the Puritans.¹ Owen’s extraordinary gifts propelled him to many high-profile positions, especially during

1. For a brief biography and bibliography of Owen, see Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 454–63.

the Commonwealth era in England (1649–1660). His remarkable career included such posts as chaplain to the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell; vice-chancellor of Oxford University; and dean of Christ Church, Oxford. He was also the theological polemicist *par excellence* of the Puritan movement, writing over eighty books, including some of the greatest theological works in the English language.² But despite such a momentous public life, John Owen was also fundamentally a pastor.

In 1647, he was called to a local congregation in Coggeshall, Essex, which grew to almost two thousand members under his ministry. During his ministry here, Owen became an outspoken congregationalist. It was a turbulent time for the Church of England: like our own day, there were fierce debates over the nature of church membership (conformity versus nonconformity), church government (presbyterian, congregationalist, or episcopalian), and a host of other, all-too-familiar questions about forms of worship, millennial views, and the relationship between church and state, to name just a few.³ In this

2. *The Works of John Owen* in sixteen volumes remain in print (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), as do the seven volumes of his massive *Exposition of Hebrews* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010) and his single-volume *Biblical Theology*, recently translated from the Latin (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009).

3. For a helpful overview of the intramural debates between the Puritans over the doctrine of the church, see Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 621–51.

highly charged atmosphere, Owen wrote the little book you hold in your hands, which pleads for unity and fellowship in the truth within the local congregation. It was the fifth book he ever published⁴ and arguably the simplest—providing the contemporary reader with an excellent introduction to the works of this great theologian.⁵ In the words of his biographer, it is “designed to recall men from debates about church order into serious, humble performance of those duties which grow out of their common fellowship in the Gospel. Amid its maxims of holy wisdom, it would be impossible to discover whether Owen was a Congregationalist or a Presbyterian.”⁶ The reader may judge for himself the accuracy of the latter statement,⁷ but there can be no doubt that Owen

4. See Andrew Thomson, *Life of Dr. Owen*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), 1:cxxi.

5. The editor of Owen's *Works*, William H. Goold, comments, “One feature of it can hardly escape the reader's attention—Owen is here, for once, a master in the art of condensation” (prefatory note to *Eshcol: A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan*, by John Owen, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), 13:52.

6. Thomson, *Life of Dr. Owen*, 1:xxxvii. See also William Orme, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Religious Connexions of John Owen, D.D.* (London: T. Hamilton, 1820), 78.

7. It could be argued that Owen's congregationalism makes a brief appearance in his parenthetical remarks about church censures in rule 14. See also Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 628–33; and Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), 179–81.

achieves his stated goal of pastorally exhorting believers of every denominational stripe to unite in the common pursuit of warm Christian fellowship.

Its original title had two parts: a typically flowery seventeenth-century title, followed by a straightforward subtitle. The former is *Eshcol; A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan, brought to the borders for the encouragement of the saints traveling thitherward, with their faces towards Zion*. The mercifully simpler subtitle is *Rules of Direction for the Walking of the Saints in Fellowship According to the Order of the Gospel*. The reference to Eshcol is from Numbers 13:23–24: “And they came unto the brook of Eshcol, and cut down from thence a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bare it between two upon a staff; and they brought of the pomegranates, and of the figs. The place was called the brook Eshcol, because of the cluster of grapes which the children of Israel cut down from thence.” Eshcol was a “sneak peek” of life in the Promised Land. It was the place where God gave His assembled people their first taste of the sweet fruits of Canaan to spur them on in their journey, till one day they enjoyed their inheritance in full. Owen’s point is that the local congregation is to be like Eshcol: it is *here* that we should get a preview of the heavenly Canaan in the fellowship it affords. He reminds us that church fellowship in the present ought to be a foretaste of the joy of the saints in one another and their Lord in glory.

Owen drives this challenge home in twenty-two rules for fellowship: seven duties of the congregation to their pastor, and fifteen duties for fellowship between members of the congregation. Each rule is supported by several proof texts, a brief explanation, and words of motivation to keep them. Together, they provide twenty-two marks of a healthy church. This helpful layout makes *Rules for Walking in Fellowship* an ideal resource for personal or small group study, and it is nothing if not Scripture saturated: almost 40 percent of the book is made up of proof texts!

Here, then, is a collection of indispensable biblical rules that will challenge Christians in any given congregation of whatever denomination—a little gem that is at the same time doctrinal, practical, and ecumenical. Writing in the nineteenth century, Owen's editor, William H. Goold, went so far as to say, "It forms a manual on church-fellowship which is to this day unsurpassed."⁸ Owen's work continues to stand the test of time, and in a day of confusion about church membership and the responsibilities it entails, it is high time for a new edition to serve the present generation.

—David G. Whitla

8. Goold, prefatory note to *Eshcol*, 13:52. This is the first time Owen's book has been reprinted as a separate volume since the London edition of 1778. See Mark Burden's bibliography, "John Owen, Learned Puritan," *Center for Early Modern Studies, University of Oxford*, <http://www.cems-oxford.org/projects/lucy-hutchinson/john-owen-learned-puritan>.

To the Reader

There are, Christian reader, certain principles of church affairs that all who seek the reformation of the church and its growth in the power of godliness generally agree to, regardless of denominational differences. Some of them are the foundation of this collection of rules for our walking in gospel fellowship. The most essential are these four:

First, that particular congregations or assemblies of believers, gathered into one body to participate in the ordinances of Jesus Christ, under their own officers, are divinely instituted.

Second, that positive commands bind every faithful believer to join himself to a single congregation that displays the marks of a true church.

Third, that in order to unite with and fellowship in a church, every man must give his own voluntary consent and submission to Christ's ordinances in that church.

Fourth, that it benefits the believers of one place to join together in one congregation unless, because they are too numerous, they decide by common consent to divide into more; this order cannot be disturbed without danger, strife, and breach of love.

These principles—which are evident in the Word, clear in themselves, and owned by virtually everyone who claims to desire the reformation of the church—are not liable to any serious exception from either Scripture or church history. I presupposed these four things and took them for granted in preparing the following rules.

The apostolic direction and precept in such cases is that “whereunto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule,” to the performance of which this promise is added: “If in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you” (Phil. 3:15–16). The current differences about church order and discipline have continued since ancient times. They have become so involved and intricate through biased debates that although these matters seem clear in the Scriptures to me, those who disagree with me would say the same thing. I have little hope of accomplishing this promise of revelation (in Phil. 3:16) in men who differ about contested truths until we first accomplish the obedience of walking suitably and answerably by the same rules that we *do* agree on.

Every day I am more persuaded of this because I see men for the most part spending their strength and

time more to oppose things they disagree with than to practice the things they and others agree are most necessary. I have designed these pages to recall the minds of men from the entanglements of controversies about church affairs (at least, the minds of those who may not have much light to judge these debates, yet have much warmth and love for gospel obedience) and encourage them to seriously, humbly perform the duties that are, by the express command of Jesus Christ, incumbent on them in how they should walk.

I shall only add this: even though people who are part of a Reformed church may observe the following rules and duties beautifully and advantageously, nevertheless most (if not all) of them ought to be the constant practice of all Christians in their daily lives, even if they are not persuaded of the necessity of any such church reformation as we plead for. And in this I am fully resolved that the practice of any one duty here mentioned by any one soul that was previously neglected shall be an abundant recompense for publishing my name with these papers, which offer so little of those ornaments of art or learning that men desire to behold in things that come to public view.

—John Owen

PART 1

*Rules for Walking in Fellowship,
with Reference to the Pastor or Minister
Who Watches Over Your Souls*

CHAPTER 1

Attending to the Ordinances Dispensed by Your Pastor

RULE 1

Diligently attend and submit to the word and all ordinances committed to his administration and dispensed by his ministerial authority, with ready obedience in the Lord.

Proof Texts

- ∞ **1 Corinthians 4:1**—Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.
- ∞ **2 Corinthians 5:18, 20**—And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation.... Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.

- ☞ **Galatians 4:14**—And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.
- ☞ **2 Thessalonians 3:14**—And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.
- ☞ **Hebrews 13:7, 17**—Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.... Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

Explanation

There is a twofold power for dispensing the Word of God: (1) ability and (2) authority.

The first power (ability) with its attending qualifications is mentioned and recounted in 1 Timothy 3:2–7; Titus 1:6–9; and many other places. Ability is required of those who are called to the office of minister. It may also be found in various degrees and measures in some who are never set apart to the ministry but who are by this gift nonetheless warranted to share the gospel when the providence of God calls them to (Rom. 10:14–15). The work of preaching for the conversion of souls is a moral duty, under the general precept of “doing good to

all.” The fact that some men are appointed to perform this work as a specific office does not prevent it.

The *second* power (authority) is proper only to those who are set apart to this work in an orderly manner, as we see from the following:

1. Christ’s institution of the office (Eph. 4:11).
2. God’s providential designation of the persons (Matt. 9:38).
3. The church’s call, election, appointment, acceptance, and submission (Acts 6:3; 14:23; 2 Cor. 8:5; Gal. 4:14; 1 Thess. 5:12–13).

These do not give pastors dominion over the faith of believers (2 Cor. 1:24) nor make them lords over God’s heritage (1 Peter 5:3), but entrust them with a stewarding power in the house of God (1 Cor. 4:1–2)—that is, the particular flock over which, in particular, they have been made overseers (Acts 20:28).

From such ministers we are to receive the word as the truth of God (as we should from all who speak according to the gospel), but also as the truth that they in particular hold out with ministerial authority, according to the institution of Christ.

The failure to consider these things lies at the heart of all that negligence, carelessness, and laziness in hearing the word preached that has possessed many professing Christians in our day. Nothing but a respect for the truth and authority of God in the administration

of the word will ever bring the minds of men to pay attention to it soberly and profitably. Men are not weary of hearing until they are weary of practicing.

Motivations

1. The name in which they speak and administer (2 Cor. 5:20).
2. The work that they do (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:1; 1 Tim. 4:16).
3. The return that they make (Heb. 8:17).
4. The regard that the Lord has for them in His employment (Matt. 10:40–41; Luke 10:16).
5. The account that hearers must make of the word they dispense (2 Chron. 36:15–16; Prov. 1:22–29; 13:13; Mark 4:24; Luke 10:16; Heb. 2:1–3; 4:2).