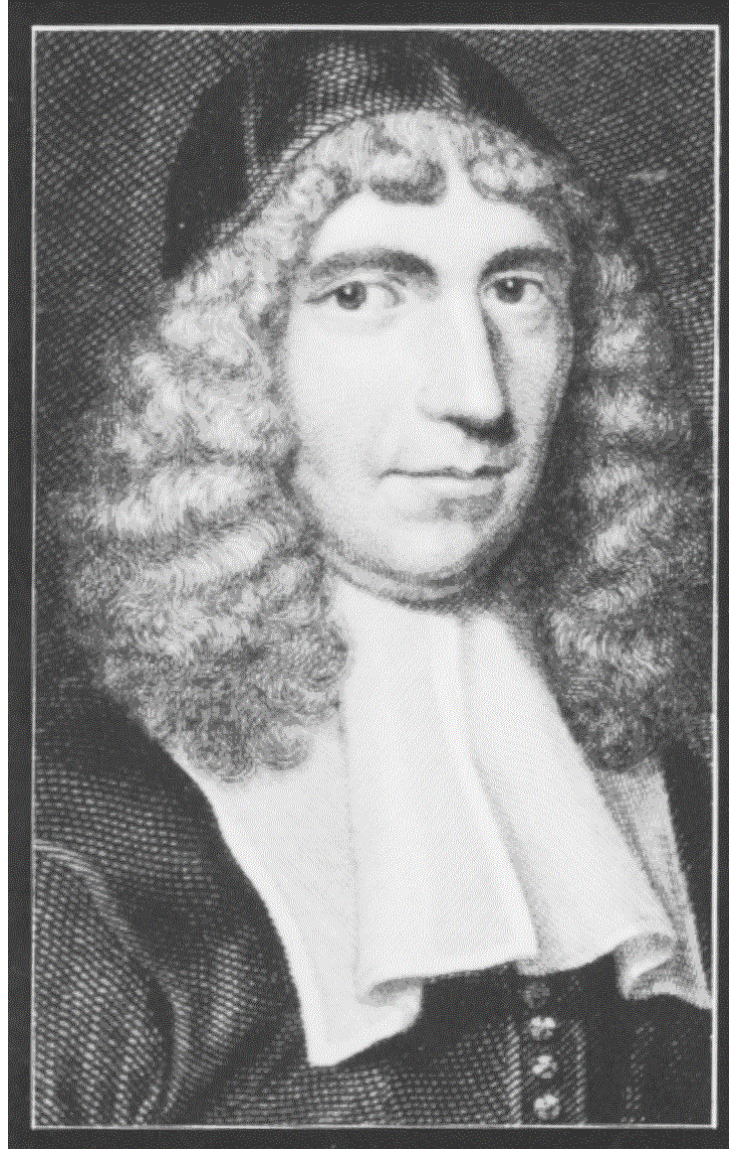


MEET JOHN OWEN: GOD'S MAN FOR THE AGES



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Introduction

The impact of the seventeenth-century Reformed movement in England must not be underestimated. It was the era of Puritan, Presbytery, and Prelacy vying for ascendancy. Religious aberrations competed for the hearts and souls of God's people.¹ Power and persecution ruled. Political turmoil and uncertainty was the order of the day. Intolerance drove Puritans to America seeking "a city on hill." Yet, it was the "golden age" of Presbyterianism. The Baptist movement was born. Congregationalism came of age. Over a century of Protestant theological heritage was preserved in one of finest statements of the Christian faith ever written by man—the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. It was a season of great minds, great hearts, and powerful figures. And standing at the very center of the seismic shifts in church and culture was a man named John Owen—pastor, churchman, and quintessential Puritan theologian. His life intersected with many of the leading figures and events that shaped his world and beyond. If the American church owes much of its origin to this remarkable century, arguably its greatest theological representative is the man whose life will here be explored.

Formative Years (1616-1642)

John Owen was born in 1616 in the village of Stadham in Oxfordshire, England. He was the second son of Henry Owen, vicar of the local Episcopalian church. His father was a man of Welsh ancestry and Puritan convictions who reportedly distinguished himself as a "painful labourer in the vineyard of the Lord"² all his days. Little is known

¹ Some of the major religious points of view which Owen addressed in his day were: 1) Arminianism (affirmed human cooperation in salvation); 2) Romanism (sought return to Papal practices and authority); Socinianism (denied the Trinity); and 4) Enthusiasm ("Inner light" movements like the Quakers).

² Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 1.

of John's childhood. Owen biographer Peter Toon describes the difficulty in securing information on his life in general:

Not one of John Owen's diaries has been preserved; and since the extant letters in which he lays bare his soul are very few, and recorded, personal reactions of others to him are brief and scarce, this study necessarily lacks many of those personal touches which have helped to establish biography as an important part of English literature.³

Owen was probably tutored at home by his parents until the age of ten when the eminent Edward Sylvester continued his studies in preparation for entrance into the University. At twelve he entered Queen's College, Oxford for classical studies under Thomas Barlow. Here the curriculum developed proficiency in such areas as grammar, rhetoric, philosophy, and mathematics. Owen had a consuming appetite for study, regularly allowing himself only four hours of sleep a night. He would later express regret for the toll taken upon his health. His diversions included such track and field events as the Javelin and the long jump, as well as musical studies with the flute. He graduated with his B. A. on June 11, 1632 at the age of sixteen and received his M. A. three years later (April 12, 1635).

The ministerial career of Owen began with ordination as a deacon in the Church of England which allowed him the privilege of reading Scripture. In 1635 he began a seven year course of study at Oxford toward his Bachelor of Divinity to prepare for the ministry. At the time England and its institutions were under the heavy hand of Archbishop William Laud⁴ (1573-1645) whose policies, with the approval of King Charles I, sought to force Puritans into compliance with his Anglican views of worship

³ Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen, Pastor, Educator, Theologian* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1971), 1.

⁴ William Laud became Chancellor of Oxford University in 1629 and Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633. His policies were regarded by the Puritan's as forcing Romanism back into the church. Often when the Puritans speak of the Papacy, they are speaking of the Church of England as ordered by Laud and his reforms.

and church government. Conscience stricken, Owen was unable to subscribe to Laud's policies at Oxford and withdrew from the program after two years. He never completed his formal theological studies.

Upon leaving Oxford in 1637, Owen was granted a "living" as chaplain in the estate of Sir Robert Dormer of Ascot. His duties included religious oversight of Dormer's family and servants, as well as the tutelage of his eldest son. Later he accepted a similar position from the Lord Lovelace of Hurly in Berkshire. These happy days, however, came to an end when Owen found himself on opposite sides of his benefactor in the brewing Civil War by his support of Parliament over and against the monarchy.

Conversion (1642)

When Owen moved to London in 1642 he was under a mental and spiritual cloud—what the Puritans called a "melancholy." It is uncertain whether he lacked salvation or merely the assurance of salvation. For Owen this inner struggle had occurred on and off from his late teens to early twenties. It was a season of introspection and doubt concerning his spiritual state—perhaps a uniquely Puritan trait experienced similarly by John Bunyan and others. What is certain, however, is an event that often marks his conversion. One Sabbath, he went to hear the famous Presbyterian preacher and later Westminster Divine, Dr. Edmond Calamy (1600-1666) at Aldermanbury Chapel. Upon arrival at the church, Calamy had been replaced by an unknown country preacher. Despite the disappointment, he remained. The unknown preacher chose Matthew 8:26 as his text: "Why are ye so fearful, O ye of little faith?" Owen biographer, Andrew Thomson says:

Immediately it arrested the thoughts of Owen as appropriate to his present state of mind, and he breathed an inward prayer that God would be pleased by that minister to speak to his condition. The prayer was heard, for the preacher stated and answered the very

doubts that had long perplexed Owen's mind; and by the time the discourse was ended, had succeeded in leading him forth into the sunshine of a settled peace.⁵

Owen never learned the name of the man who brought Christ so powerfully to his soul.

Fordham Parish (1643-1646)

Owen began to attract attention in March of 1642 with the publication of his first book entitled *A Display of Arminianism*. The work is a comprehensive critique and refutation of a theological system that insists on human cooperation in God's saving grace. It was so thorough that it is still regarded as definitive today. *Display of Arminianism* was dedicated to the "Lords and Gentlemen for the Committee on Religion" and subsequently printed by the publishing committee of the House of Commons. Upon the strength of this book alone—despite the fact that Owen was *not* ordained and did *not* possess a divinity degree—he was appointed the following year by the "Committee on Religion" to assume the parish church at Fordham. The previous minister, John Alsop, had departed under questionable circumstances and was subsequently sequestered in the Tower of London.⁶

His first parish ministry at the secluded village of Fordham is regarded by Thomson as "one of the happiest of his life."⁷ He was wed to Mary Rooke of Coggeshall in 1643, who eventually bore him eleven children. Sadly, only one daughter survived to adulthood and she died of consumption after a failed marriage. As a conscientious pastor, Owen gave himself to preaching, visiting, and catechizing families house to

⁵ Andrew Thomson, *John Owen: Prince of Puritans* (repr., Geanies House, Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, Ltd. 1971), 26; Peter Toon observes, "The great Charles Spurgeon was to have a similar experience over two centuries later when he experienced conversion through the ministry of an illiterate preacher who substituted at the minute for the preacher who had been engaged to speak." Toon, 13.

⁶ Toon, 17. He furthermore reports, "A note at the tope of a page in the parish register reads: 'John, Pastor, Anno.Dom. July: 16: 1643.' The word 'pastor' is significant suggestion that Owen did not think of his calling as that of a 'vicar' or 'rector,' but rather as the pastor of the faithful in the parish and evangelist to the rest."

⁷ Thomson, 29.

house. During his first year he produced another work entitled *The Duties of Pastors and People Distinguished* (1643). Thomson says:

Its main design is to ‘describe the means to be used by the people of God, distinct from church officers, for the increasing of divine knowledge in themselves and others’, and to show how ‘the sacred calling may retain its ancient dignity, though the people of God be not deprived of their Christian liberty.’⁸

Shortly afterwards he wrote *The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ Unfolded, in Two Short Catechisms*. These catechisms provided a series of Christ centered questions and answers for the purpose of establishing youth in the gospel and providing assistance for parents in home instruction. While at Fordham, his reputation was expanded on April 29, 1646 as he was invited to preach before Parliament. His topic was the “Macedonian Call” from Acts 16:9.

Owen began his ministry at Fordham at the inception of the Westminster Assembly. It is often wondered why this man who became the quintessential Puritan theologian was never a part of that remarkable convention. It must be remembered, however, that Owen’s reputation was only emerging at the time of Westminster’s beginnings. During his Fordham days, Owen regarded himself as a mild Presbyterian. This would soon change as he would become the leading representative for the rising Congregational movement in England. Upon the death of his predecessor at Fordham in 1646, his appointment came to an end. When the people of St. Peter’s Church in Coggeshall of Essex, just five miles away, heard of his dismissal, they eagerly sought him out for their parish.

⁸ Thomson, 31.

St. Peter's of Coggeshall (1646-1651)

St. Peter's of Coggeshall was a well grounded prosperous congregation of about two thousand souls. Where the Fordham church had had serious deficiencies in doctrine and life, Coggeshall knew a series of faithful ministers⁹ who had taught the Word of God. Owen's tenure at Coggeshall is noteworthy in that he changed his view with regard to church government, giving up his loosely held Presbyterian convictions in favor of the independent or Congregationalist model—a system of government he once called “democratical confusion.”¹⁰ It is interesting to note that most Puritans in England (and New England) were Congregationalist. Owen had become convinced after reading *Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*, the work of the famous New England Puritan, John Cotton (1585-1652). Nevertheless, he retained a number of Presbyterian convictions like elder oversight and infant baptism. It should also be pointed out that Owen was still not ordained and thus not under the authority of either Prelate (Bishop) or Presbytery. Thus he had for all intents and purposes been functioning as an Independent up to this time. Nevertheless, most Congregationalists were at one with the Presbyterians of the day on fundamental matters of Reformed doctrine. But they were wary of some aspects of Scottish authoritarianism and thus tended to drift in the Congregational direction. Many were also members of the Church of England, although somewhat of a subset marginalized by the bishops. Philip Nye was the Westminster Assembly's most able Congregational representative. In time Owen would become his heir-apparent.

⁹ Westminster Divine Obadiah Sedgwick and his brother John had preceded Owen at Coggeshall. See Ferguson, *Christian Life*, 4.

¹⁰ Owen, *Works*, XIII:209. See Ferguson, *Christian Life*, 5. An account of his journey from moderate Presbyterianism to Congregationalism is found in *A Review of the True Nature of Schism*. See Owen, *Works*, XIII:222-223.

At Coggeshall he produced his weighty treatise on particular redemption in 1647 entitled *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. The same year *Eshcol or Rules and Directions for the Walking of the Saints in Fellowship* appeared where he set out regulations for church life.

Civil War (1640s)

The 1640s in England was a decade of foment. The Solemn League and Covenant was affirmed between English Parliamentarians and Scottish Covenanters in 1643.¹¹ The Westminster Assembly (1643-1649) was called by Parliament with hopes of uniting the church in common doctrine, polity, and worship. It produced some of the church's most enduring and influential documents with the completion of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, its *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, and its *Directory of Worship*. Ironically, the only ecclesiastical body to receive its work as its own was the Church of Scotland which was minimally represented.¹²

This decade was also a period of civil war. King and Parliament were becoming increasingly antagonistic with each other. King Charles I was a Romanist. The Parliament was primarily Puritan, and military commander Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) was becoming an increasingly powerful figure. War came to Essex with the siege of Colchester in 1648 by the Royalists. Coggeshall became the headquarters of the

¹¹ Authored by Scotsman Alexander Henderson, the Solemn League and Covenant was an agreement between the English Parliamentarians and Scottish Covenanters in opposition to the royalists. It was a mutual pledge to work toward the civil and religious union of England, Scotland and Ireland under Presbyterianism and Parliamentary rule. It was embraced by the Church of Scotland on Aug. 17, 1643 and later by the English Parliament and the Westminster Assembly on Sept. 25, 1643. The English regarded it primarily as civil securing military allies. The Scots considered it a religious covenant securing the right of Presbyterianism and responded by sending an army to England.

¹² Of some 150 members of the Westminster Assembly, only six were Scottish—and they had no voting privilege. Later, Baptist and the Congregational churches affirmed the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in slightly modified forms. Congregationalists affirmed it as the *Savoy Declaration* in 1658; Baptists affirmed it in the form of the *London Confession* of 1677 and the *Philadelphia Confession* of 1742.

Parliamentary troops seeking to remove them. Owen, serving as their chaplain, became good and fast friends with General Fairfax of the Parliamentary army. He also became acquainted with Cromwell's son-in-law, Henry Ireton (d. 1651), and gave his funeral oration when he died several years later.¹³ With Parliament's eventual victory over the English monarchy, Charles I was beheaded on Wednesday, January 30, 1649 for "levying war on the nation"¹⁴ ushering in a period in English history known as the Commonwealth or the Interregnum. The nation's rule fell upon Parliament and Lord General Cromwell became the Lord Protector in 1653 as the effective head of state.

Military Chaplain (1649-1650)

Remarkably, the day after the King's execution, John Owen, now only thirty-two years of age, was invited to preach before Parliament. The sermon was entitled, "Righteous Zeal Encourage by Divine Protection" from Jeremiah 15:19-20: "I will make thee unto this people a fenced brazen wall; and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee: for I am with thee to save thee, and to deliver thee, saith the LORD." His esteem was sealed as the fathers of England looked to this young man for words of wisdom in their difficult hour.

Later the same year Owen, after preaching again to Parliament on Hebrews 12:27, visited the home of his good friend, General Fairfax, only to find that General Cromwell and his staff were present for meetings. While Owen was waiting for Fairfax, Cromwell burst into the room, laid his hand upon Owen's shoulder and said, "Sir, You are the person I must be acquainted with."

Owen humbly replied, "That will be much more to my advantage than yours."

¹³ Ferguson, *Christian Life*, 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Cromwell returned, “We shall soon see that.”¹⁵ Having attracted the attention of Oliver Cromwell, Owen was enlisted as chaplain of Cromwell’s army which was soon to be deployed to Ireland. Owen’s commission was to accompany “the twelve thousand psalm-singing, Bible reading Puritan soldiers [about] to descend upon Ireland, ‘Like the hammer of Thor.’”¹⁶ Owen would preach to the troops and set affairs in order at the University of Dublin at the behest of Parliament. He was offered a salary of 200 lbs. per year when the average pastor received only 70 lbs. per year.¹⁷ While in Dublin he inspected Trinity College made recommendations to Cromwell for improvement of facility and faculty. He responded to criticisms of *Death of Death* in a work simply called *The Death of Christ*. He also began a lifelong dialogue, sparring with the redoubtable Presbyterian and unconventional Puritan, Richard Baxter (1615-1691). However, his greatest contribution to his Irish excursion was to stir up hearts and raise vision to fill the void of gospel ministry among Irish people.

The Coggeshall church granted him leave of absence until he returned the following May, 1650. But his civilian life was short lived. Before the year’s end his services as chaplain was once again demanded by Cromwell, this time in Scotland. The Scots were disapproving of Charles I’s demise and thus distrusting of Parliament (Charles was a Stuart King and a Scot). They sought to enthrone his son, Charles II, a move that conflicted with Parliamentary designs. An army was sent to Scotland to prevent invasion from the north. While in Edinburgh Owen preached in Old St. Giles, the church of John

¹⁵ Thomson, 43.

¹⁶ Ferguson, *Christian Life*, 7. This campaign is scared by the siege and massacre at Drogheda which has left Cromwell in infamy among the Irish. Ferguson says, “Nothing need here be said of the terrible massacre at Drogheda, and the days of slaughter which lie buried in the roots of the uneasy relationship which has existed between Westminster and Dublin since then. The best that can be said is that Cromwell did not step beyond the bounds of the rules of war and siege warfare of his times.” *Christian Life*, 7-8.

¹⁷ Derek Thomas, “Post Reformational Theological Leaders—John Owen, Lecture 1” (Lecture, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI, n.d.), 2.

Knox. At first distrusted, he was later received with affection by the Scots as one who proclaimed “the sweet savour of Christ.”¹⁸ In Glasgow Owen debated the Scot clergy regarding the question of English occupation. The younger, and later famous, Hugh Binning (1627-1653) is said to have confounded Owen and other English Divines—doubtless a prejudiced opinion although with Binning certainly a possibility. Ferguson recounts Cromwell’s reaction: “Enquiring for the name of the young presbyterian, and discovering it to be Binning, Cromwell punned, ‘He hath *bound* well, indeed’, and, laying his hand on the sword at his side, added, ‘But this will loose all again!’”¹⁹ “But long ere Cromwell’s campaign in Scotland was over,” says Andrew Thomson, and “Owen had been permitted to return to his books and to his quiet pastorate in Essex.”²⁰

University Dean and Vice-Chancellor (1651-1660)

The following year to his surprise, Owen read in a local newspaper: “On the 18th of March, 1651, the House, taking into consideration the worth and usefulness of John Owen, M. A., of Queen’s College, ordered that he be settled in the deanery of Christchurch, in room of Dr Reynolds.”²¹ Cromwell, who was Chancellor of the University of Oxford, Christ Church, had appointed him College Dean which decisively brought his tenure of five years at Coggeshall to an end. On September 9, 1652, Owen was promoted to Vice-Chancellor. As Dean he was responsible to lecture on theology and preside at meetings. As Vice-Chancellor, Owen became the effective head of one of the most prestigious and celebrated Universities in all Europe. When he assumed his office the University was in disarray having been neglected during the Civil War.

¹⁸ Thomson, 47.

¹⁹ Ferguson, *Christian Life*, 9.

²⁰ Thomson, 48.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Owen's goals were more than bringing order back to the institution. He desired to promote Reformed piety among the students. To this end he shared the pulpit of St. Mary's Church with one who was equal in stature to himself, the famous Puritan Thomas Goodwin, President of the University of Magdalen. At the commencement ceremony in 1653 the degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred upon him.

Needless to say, Owen's season at Oxford afforded him some opportunity to write. As might be expected, several of his works were academic in nature. He wrote a work in Latin entitled *De Divina Justitia Diatriba* or the *Dissertation on Divine Justice* in 1653. The work addressed the important hypothetical question, "Could God forgive sin without the atonement of Christ?" Dr. Twisse, prolocutor of the Westminster Assembly, and Scotland's Samuel Rutherford of St. Andrew's surprisingly held the affirmative view. Owen believed otherwise. Other works addressed some of the main aberrations of his day. In 1654 he wrote *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance Explained and Confirmed* comprising, in effect, a six-hundred page "book review" of Arminian John Goodwin's book *Redemption Redeemed*. In 1655 he addressed the issue of Socinianism, the precursor of Unitarianism which rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. The work was entitled *Vindiciae Evangelicae* or *Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated*.

However some of his most accessible works for modern readers were the results of his preaching ministry at St. Mary's. Stemming from sermons addressed to teenage boys, he published *Mortification of Sin* in 1656 based on Romans 8:13: "If you through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body you shall live" (Cf. Col. 3:5). Two years later in 1658 *Of Temptation* was published, comprising a treatment of the title's subject based on Oxford sermons from Matthew 26:41 where Jesus says, "Watch and pray, that ye enter

not into temptation.” The two works presented the essence of the gospel method of sanctification. In 1657 one of Owen’s most celebrated works, regarded as “one of his best devotional treatises”,²² was printed by the title *Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*. It, too, originated as sermons preached at Oxford. In it he shows that the doctrine of the Trinity is more than a pedantic idea; it is vital and central to religious piety as the Christian experience is Trinitarian. Anthony Wood, who was no friend of the Puritans, nevertheless had this to say about Owen’s preaching: “His personage was proper and comely and he had a very graceful behavior in the pulpit, an eloquent elocution, a winning and insinuating deportment and could by the persuasion of his oratory...move and win the affections of his admiring auditory almost as he pleased.”²³

Owen furthermore showed himself to be a churchman. He engaged the ever pressing discussion on schism of which Protestant churches were regularly accused by the Romanists. He participated in a conference on Church union in 1653 ordered by Cromwell to explore harmony among the various factions of the church. Of this conference Ferguson says, “The discussion did not bear the intended fruit, as far as union was concerned, but they were another striking instance of the ecumenical and evangelical concern of Owen and many of his contemporaries.”²⁴ In 1657 he wrote *Review of the True Nature of Schism* and other works on the subject. Along with the Reformers in general, Owen joined ranks in striving for church unity on gospel grounds. For Owen, the true schismatics were those who rejected the gospel; to separate from them was *not* schism.

²² Thomson, 82.

²³ Cited by Peter Toon, 55.

²⁴ Ferguson, *Christian Life*, 11.

During his time at Oxford²⁵ he was briefly elected to Parliament and served in several appointments at the behest of Cromwell. However, his relationship with Cromwell waned when the Lord Protector began entertaining the idea of being crowned King. When Owen made his objections known in 1657, he was replaced as Vice-Chancellor remaining only as Dean of Christ Church until 1660.²⁶ Cromwell died in 1658 and his son, Richard, assumed his place. The Monarchy was restored in 1660 under King Charles II. The Puritan party lost power, prestige, and protection. Owen fell from favor along with them and embarked upon a new stage of his life.

Nonconformist and Congregational Apologist (1660-1674)

In 1658 the Congregationalists met at the Savoy Palace in London to discuss its own confession of faith. When all was said and done the *Savoy Declaration* was little different from the *Westminster Confession* except for its statements on church government. Thomson observes, “The articles of the Savoy Confession bear a close resemblance to those of the famous Confession of the Westminster divines—in most places retaining its very words.”²⁷ Owen was the Assembly’s leading figure writing the Preface to its *Declaration* and influencing its final outcome. His irenic spirit is seen in

²⁵ It is interesting to note some of the names associated with Oxford during Owen’s Vice-Chancellorship: theologians Thomas Goodwin and Stephan Charnock, and those making permanent contribution to western culture like Christopher Wren, William Penn, and John Locke all of whom held junior studentships during Owen’s tenure. See Ferguson, *Christian Life*, 12.

²⁶ Upon stepping down as Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, Owen reported: “Professors’ salaries, lost for many years, have been maintained and paid; many offices, by not means negligible ones sustained; the rights and privileges of the University have been defended against some efforts of its enemies; the treasury is tenfold increased; many of every rank in the university have been promoted to various honours and benefices; new exercises have been introduced and established; old ones have been duly performed; reformation of manners has been diligently undertaken in spite of the grumbling of certain profligate brawlers; labours have been numberless.” Cited by Oliver, 23.

²⁷ Thomson, 79; Peter Toon similarly observes, “The theological doctrines of the *Declaration of Faith* are those of orthodox Calvinism in general agreement (though with perhaps a stronger emphasis on federal theology) with those set forth in the *Confession of Faith* produced by the Westminster Assembly”; For the *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order* see website: http://www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/documents/Savoy_Declaration/index.html

such statements as when he wrote, “The differences between Presbyterians and Independents are differences between fellow servants” and “churches consisting of persons sound in faith and of good conversation, ought not to refuse communion with each other, though they walk not in all things according to the same rules of church order.”²⁸ Upon his dismissal from Oxford, Owen became the champion of the Independent movement in England and abroad. He was also offered the prestigious First Congregational Church of Boston in New England. In 1671, he was invited by Harvard University in New England to be the successor to the famous Puritan scholar John Cotton as its President. He declined both.

After the Restoration, Owen returned to Stadham to nurture a small Congregational church. The Puritans as a whole fell on hard times because of their complicity with Cromwell and Parliamentary rule, and their resistance to what they regarded the Papacy assuming control of the church again. According to Peter Toon, “From 1662 to 1689 Nonconformists live under the dark cloud of repressive legislation and of this the pastor and his flock had to take careful notice.”²⁹ During this period known as the Great Persecution, Puritan pastors were driven from their pulpits in large number under the Act of Uniformity (1662). John Bunyan spent years in prison. The Covenanters in Scotland suffered martyrdom. Owen likewise knew hardship. He was harassed and arrested as a Nonconformist.³⁰ He endured prosecution.³¹ His church at

²⁸ Cited by Thomson, 80.

²⁹ Toon, 150.

³⁰ Robert W. Oliver says of the term “nonconformist”: “Before 1660 the term ‘Nonconformist’ described an Anglican clergy-man who ignored some of the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer, thereby avoiding what he considered to be remnants of ‘popish superstition’. Requirements particularly obnoxious to the Puritans were the compulsory wearing of the surplice and making the sign of the cross in baptism. In the 1630s Archbishop Laud made further demands which included the railing in of the communion table at the east end of the church and bowing at the name of Jesus....Laud’s changes began to give the east end of the

Stadham was dispersed. The Conventicle Act (1664) made illegal private meetings of unauthorized churches. Finally the Five-Mile Act (1665) banned nonconformist ministers from cities and former parishes.³² This made it impossible for pastors to gain support from former congregants imposing in effect banishment from society. On the whole, however, Owen survived the dragnet first because he was relatively wealthy; second, because he had friends in high places. Peter Toon remarks:

Owen's comparative freedom from persecution and privation was in part due to the fact that during his days as Dean of Christ Church he had accumulated a large group of friends, many of them wealthy, and these stood by him and supported him with their hospitality and help.³³

During these latter days of his ministry, Thomson observes, "He continued to display an almost miraculous fertility of authorship that is only equaled by that of his illustrious compeer, Richard Baxter; and, at the same time, he took no second part in the great ecclesiastical movements of that most eventful age."³⁴ At Stadham he published his Oxford lectures in Latin under the Greek title *Theologoumena Pantodapa* in 1661, which expounded a history of the rise and progress of Biblical theology "from the time of Adam to the fully developed and revealed theology of the New Testament."³⁵ He defended the Protestant cause against Romanism in *Fiat Lux* (1662). He wrote against the unjust treatment of Nonconformists. In 1668 three of Owen's finest works appeared.

churches a more Romish appearance." See "John Owen—His Life and Times" in *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, Robert W. Oliver, editor (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Press, 2002): 12-13.

³¹ Toon, 148-149.

³² See Toon, 125n. The Clarendon Code comprised four legal sanctions enacted from 1661-1665 which established the supremacy of Anglicanism in the aftermath of the Commonwealth: 1) Corporation Act (1661) rejected the Solemn League and Covenant (1643), excluded non-conformist from public office, and required Anglican communion; 2) Act of Uniformity (1662) made the *Book of Common Prayer* mandatory for worship (also known as the "great ejection" as over 2000 Puritan ministers lost their privilege to preach); 3) Conventicle Act (1664) forbid unauthorized gatherings for worship (no more than five people of different households could gather); 4) Five-Mile Act (1665) prevented ministers from coming near former congregations or incorporated towns. The Clarendon Code proved to be the height of religious intolerance.

³³ Toon, 149.

³⁴ Thomson, 78.

³⁵ Toon, 56.

Indwelling Sin in Believers (1667) is regarded as a classic on the doctrine of Original Sin. *Exposition of 130th Psalm* explores assurance and piety. The first volume of four on his *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* appeared³⁶ of which his treatments of the Lord's Day and the High Priesthood of Christ are classic. Toon remarks that in the last twenty years of his life, Owen produced "a series of works which rank amongst the greatest theological books of seventeenth-century Protestantism" and have "given Owen a lasting reputation."³⁷

London Pastor

At age fifty-eight in 1674, during a reprieve in persecution, Owen moved to London and began preaching regularly at the nonconformist Leadenhall Street church where Westminster Divine Joseph Caryl (1602-1673) spent twenty-three years preaching through the *Book of Job*.³⁸ The church attracted a number of notable figures from the Commonwealth days like Lord Charles Fleetwood and Colonel Desborough. He was a repeated guest of King Charles II where they conversed on such matters as religious liberty and the relief of ministers made destitute by royal and ecclesiastical policies. Although oppression of Puritans continued, King Charles provided a fund for Owen's use "to be employed by him in mitigating the sufferings of his poorer brethren."³⁹ Owen's status as a statesman for the Puritan cause made him somewhat immune to what his poorer colleagues were suffering.

Perhaps no Puritan suffered more under the monarchy's heavy hand than the "uneducated" John Bunyon—a poor tinker by trade and a Baptist preacher by calling who

³⁶ The second volume was published in 1674; the third in 1680; the fourth was published posthumously.

³⁷ Toon, 165.

³⁸ Derek Thomas. His sermons are still available today in twelve volumes entitled *Practical Observations on the Book of Job*.

³⁹ Thomson, 108.

gave the world a most precious treasure in *Pilgrim's Progress*. When Bunyan preached, Owen was among thousands who hung on his every word. The King was reported to have asked Owen how he could endure “to hear a tinker prate.” Owen responded, “May it please your majesty, could I possess the tinker’s ability for preaching, I would willingly relinquish all my learning.”⁴⁰ Toward the latter end of Bunyan’s twelve years of confinement in the Bedford jail, Owen is supposed to have intervened repeatedly for his release. Bunyan’s classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*, was printed with Owen’s help, at his expense, and by his own printer, Nathaniel Ponder (1640-1699).⁴¹

Several works produced during the latter period of Owen’s life are worthy of mention. Arguably his greatest work, *Discourse on the Holy Spirit*, was printed in 1674. Those who criticize the Reformed faith for not giving adequate attention to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit have simply not read this definitive work. Toon calls it, “His greatest contribution to the discipline of theology.” He continues, “Although the Protestant Reformation had brought a new emphasis to the role of the Spirit in the Church, it was left to divines of the seventeenth-century to develop this emphasis. Amongst these Owen stands supreme.”⁴² Owen, among other things is grappling with the errors of the Enthusiast (Quakers and the like) on the one hand and the Socinians (who deny the Holy Spirit’s personality) on the other. Through it he established the important point that all gracious works of God in a believer’s life results first from the inward ministry of the Holy Spirit. Thomson said in the nineteenth century, “The better part of two centuries have elapsed since this work of Owen’s was given to the world, and yet no English work

⁴⁰ Thomson, 109.

⁴¹ Ponder is sometimes called “Bunyan Ponder” for his role in publishing Bunyan’s *Pilgrim's Progress*. See Toon, 162.

⁴² Toon, 166.

on the same vital subject has approached in its exhaustive fullness.”⁴³ An exposition on the controversial text in Hebrew 6:4-6 was published under the title *The Nature and Causes of Apostasy* in 1676. A year later his stout classic, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, made its appearance.⁴⁴ In 1681 *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded* became available to the public.

Over the course of his life, John Owen bereaved the loss of ten of his eleven children. In January 1676, he laid to rest his beloved wife, Mary, of some thirty-two years. Nothing is known of his sense of personal loss. However, human experience alone is adequate in and of itself to imagine that he knew heartache sufficient for a lifetime. He remained unmarried for eighteen months when he was united to Michel, the wealthy widow of Thomas D’Oyley of Chislehampton.

Last Days

A lifetime of toil and turmoil began taking its toll on Owen. He suffered from debilitating Asthma and painful gallstones.⁴⁵ Thomson notes, “He is said to have stooped considerably during the latter years of his life,” in contrast with former days “when in full vigour his person was tall and majestic.”⁴⁶ Assistants were secured to help him in both writing and preaching. For the former work Robert Ferguson and Scotsmen Alexander Shields were secured. However, it was the amiable David Clarkson who became his colleague in pastoral ministry. Noted for his book, *Public Worship to Be Preferred Before Private*, Clarkson was the one who eventually preached at Owen’s funeral. Owen continued to write against Romanism and was tireless supporter and promoter of union

⁴³ Thomson, 111.

⁴⁴ Owen’s work on Justification was required reading in Seminary by the author of this paper over thirty years ago.

⁴⁵ Ferguson, *Christian Life*, 17.

⁴⁶ Thomson, 129.

among Protestants. Although an avid apologist for Congregationalism he did not regard matters of polity sufficient cause for division among the true church. He lobbied for religious toleration, meaning that matters of religious conscience were the province of ecclesiastical discipline, not civil punishment. He was as hard on his brethren in New England as he was on the public officials in Old England.

The final work from Owen's pen was his beloved *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*. It was, in effect, reflections of a man in touch with his mortality, longing to see the Savior face to face. As Bunyan would have said, "Drawing near to the city, he had yet a more perfect view thereof."⁴⁷ With his health failing, Owen was invited to recoup at the country estate of Lord Wharton, a friend of nonconforming ministers. It was hoped that fresh air and stimulating conversation would aid his improvement. Ministry was intermittent in his latter days due to health. But finally he settled in a house he owned in the quiet village of Ealing. The day before his death he wrote his good friend Charles Fleetwood:

Although I am not able to write one word myself, yet I am very desirous to speak one word more to you in this world, and do it by the hand of my wife....

I am going to him whom my soul has loved, or rather who has loved me with an everlasting love—which is the whole ground of my consolation. The passage is very irksome and wearisome, through strong pains of various sorts, which are all issued in an intermitting fever....

I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm; but whilst the great Pilot is in it, the loss of a poor under-rower will be inconsiderable. Live, and pray, and hope, and wait patiently, and do not despond; the promise stands invincible, that he will never leave us, nor forsake us.⁴⁸

Owen's biographer, Peter Toon, relates an account of the Puritan's last day on earth.

Friend and minister, William Payne from Saffron Walden in Essex, who had been attending to the printing and proof-reading of Owen's recently completed *Meditations*

⁴⁷ Cited by Thomson, 123.

⁴⁸ Thomson, 125-126.

and Discourses on the Glory of Christ, visited the ailing theologian to announce the book's progress to the printers. Owen exclaimed, "O, Brother Payne, the long-wished-for day is come at last, in which I shall see the glory in another manner than I have ever done or was capable of doing in this world."⁴⁹ The same day, August 24, 1683, John Owen passed from the *light of grace* to the *light of glory* to behold the Beatific Vision of the Savior which he labored to understand with his mind, visualize by faith, and articulate with words. Ironically his death came on the anniversary the Great Ejection, or what the Puritans called, "Black Bartholomew's Day."⁵⁰ The *Glory of Christ* is a fitting epitaph to the life of one whose contribution to Christian thought is virtually beyond measure. The earthly remains of this man mighty for Christ were laid in the "Puritan necropolis"⁵¹ known as Bunhill fields. At his funeral oration, David Clarkson, eulogized Owen with these words:

I need not tell you of this who knew him, that it was his great Design to promote Holiness in the Life and Exercise of it among you: But it was his great Complaint, that its Power declined among Professors. It was his Care and Endeavour to prevent or cure spiritual Decays in his own Flock: He was a burning and a shining Light, and you for a while rejoiced in his Light, Alas! It was but for a while; and we may Rejoyce in it still.⁵²

Let all who love the Savior and long for his appearing marvel as did Owen when he said:

I cannot understand how any man can walk with God as he ought, or hath that love for Jesus Christ which true faith will produce, or doth place his refreshments and joy in spiritual things, in things above, that doth not on all just occasions so meditate on the glory of Christ in heaven as to long for an admittance into the immediate sight of it.⁵³

⁴⁹ Peter Toon, 171.

⁵⁰ Ferguson, *Christian Life*, 18.

⁵¹ Thomson, 127.

⁵² Cited by Sinclair Ferguson, *Christian Life*, xiii.

⁵³ Owen, *Works*, I:388.

Concluding Thoughts

The most obvious legacy of John Owen is his writings. Owen authority, Derek Thomas, has said pointedly: “Owen wrote eight million words with a quill pen.”⁵⁴ The Gould edition of his works, republished by Banner of Truth, comprises twenty-four volumes, most of which are over five-hundred pages each. He published over eighty-five separated works—many in Latin. Thomson articulates what others have observed:

Owen does not merely touch his subject, but travels through it with the elephant’s grave and solid step, if sometimes also with his ungainly motion. More than any other writer, he makes you feel when he has reached the end of his subject that he has also exhausted it.⁵⁵

Owen challenges the modern church in its deficiency of Evangelical truth. To read Owen is to enter a world of thought and life, the depth and breadth of which is sadly unfamiliar to many modern pastors, let alone lay people. Owen reminds the contemporary church of its need for ministers who are theologians—that is, ministers who read, think, write, and compellingly and convincingly address those issues undercutting the gospel. Anglican Theologian J. I. Packer said:

Owen saved my spiritual sanity. I do in fact think, after fifty years, that Owen has contributed more than anyone else to make me as much a moral, spiritual and theological realist as I have so far become. He searched me to the root of my being. He taught me the nature of sin, the need to fight it, and the method of doing so. He made me see the importance of the thoughts of the heart in one’s spiritual life. He made clear to me the real nature of the Holy Spirit’s ministry in and to the believer, and of spiritual growth and progress, and of faith’s victory. He showed me how to understand myself as a Christian and live before God humbly and honestly, without pretending either to be what I am not or not to be what I am.⁵⁶

Owen was also a churchman. He is often criticized for becoming overly engaged in the politics of his day. Perhaps so! But Owen could never be rebuffed for using the

⁵⁴ Thomas.

⁵⁵ Thomson, 36.

⁵⁶ J. I. Packer, “Introduction” in *Mortification of Sin* by John Owen (repr., Geanies House, Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, Ltd., 2006), 13.

positions into which the Lord providentially led him for anything other than the advancement and well being of the church of Christ. Biographer Peter Toon recognizes that:

Owen's primary motivation and aim during his crowded life in the 1650s was the propagation of the Protestant gospel. After 1660 the same aim was also always before him, but necessarily, due to the changed religious scene and to his own uncompromising principles, the public opportunities with which he was presented were severely curtailed.⁵⁷

Owen walked among the power brokers of his day. Yet he fearlessly and uncompromisingly used this advantage to strive for toleration,⁵⁸ promote unity, advance the gospel, and expose the errors of his day.

Perhaps the greatest legacy of Owen for the modern church is to accentuate its need for of Christ-centered preaching. From the production of his first two catechisms at Fordham to the publication of the *Glory of Christ* at death, the person and work of the Savior was the driving motivation for everything in between. Owen tenaciously held to the inspiration and absolute authority of the Bible as God's word. However, for Owen according to Toon, "The sum, and substance and centre of the Old and New Testament is Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Eternal Word."⁵⁹ Robert Oliver observes, "As a pastor Owen had always laid great emphasis on preaching. It was his preaching that had attracted the attention of the grandees of the Commonwealth. That preaching was

⁵⁷ Toon, 123.

⁵⁸ It must be remembered that religious toleration for Owen in seventeenth-century England concerned mutual toleration among Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Anglicans. He even afforded opportunity for Quakers so long as they did not disrupt civil society in general. Furthermore, he did not support the use of physical sanctions by the state against religious bodies. Owen claimed in *Indulgence and Toleration Considered*, "Violence hath been used in matters of religion to the shame and stain of Christianity, and yet it never succeeded anywhere to extinguish that persuasion and opinion which it was designed to extirpate." Cited by Toon, 132,

⁵⁹ Toon, 166.

concerned above all with the glory of God in Christ and the spiritual welfare of his people.”⁶⁰ He continues:

Biographers have complained of the difficulty of getting close to this stately figure who moved easily among politicians and dons. Certainly his diaries are lost and there is a paucity of personal detail. His letters at times reveal a dry humour, but I suggest that you can get to him, by reading his sermons. There you see something of the exercises of his soul and then turn to *The Glory of Christ* to see how this remarkable man prepared himself to die.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Oliver, 37

⁶¹ Ibid., 38.

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