

## John Owen

### Biography

John Owen was born to Puritan minister Henry Owen in 1616 at Stadham, a small village near Oxford, England. John and his brother William attended Oxford University as young men, earning their B.A. and M.A. degrees from 1628-1635. Their studies followed the classical pattern and involved exercises called disputations, which were basically moderated debates in which the students displayed their knowledge and rhetorical prowess. This training would prove beneficial to Owen as a pastor and author. Owen would gain a reputation as a man who used his learning to serve the church, as Thomas Gilbert testified in this excerpt from his epitaph: “Furnished with human literature in all its kinds, and in all its degrees, he called forth all his knowledge in an orderly train to serve the interests of Religion, and minister in the Sanctuary of his God.”

So furnished, Owen became a gentleman’s chaplain and private tutor in 1635. In 1642 he felt the assurance from the Holy Spirit of his salvation as the result of attending the sermon of an unknown preacher, much like Spurgeon’s experience of conversion. As civil war brewed in England due to disagreements between Parliament and Charles I (a Stuart King), he studied diligently and, and published a document against Arminianism, foreshadowing his lifelong commitment to Calvinism. In 1643 he married Mary Rooke and became a pastor at Fordham. Around this same time, he became a Congregationalist, based on his understanding that the church was the elective gathering of visible saints, to whom God granted, at various locations, the right to choose their own leaders. This put him at odds with national or state churches, and especially with the Roman Catholic church, although the latter enmity was nothing new in his thinking.

As civil war progressed, Owen became increasingly convinced that God was at work bringing a glorious revival to England. In 1646, Owen rose to greater national and political prominence as he was summoned to preach before Parliament. He interpreted national events in biblical terms and saw Charles I’s ouster as God’s judgment against the house of Stuart. During the interregnum/Protectorate years, Owen was at first close to Cromwell, who chose him as his military chaplain to accompany him on exploits in Ireland. During these exploits, however, Owen never lost sight of the gospel, and petitioned Parliament, in the midst of political and

religious turmoil, that they not lose sight of the goal of propagating the gospel among the Irish. He also found time in Ireland to write a defense of the atonement of Christ.

Returning from the battlefields, Owen was appointed dean of Christ's Church at Oxford, and was later named Vice-Chancellor to Cromwell. In his administrative duties at the school, Owen dealt with various doctrinal controversies and strove to build up a ministerial class for England and abroad. As a nonconformist minister, he was always a little bit out of his element at Oxford, which had traditionally been an Anglican stronghold.

Owen opposed Oliver Cromwell's consideration to accept kingship from Parliament, and this drove a lifelong wedge between the two friends. When the Protectorate began to crumble in 1659 under Cromwell's son Richard, Owen encouraged his resignation. After the restoration of Charles II, Owen remained a non-conformist Congregational pastor and continued to publish both doctrinal and civic treatises. He was most active in defending acts of religious toleration which was threatened under Charles II and various efforts to re-establish the official state church. Before his death in 1683 he completed a three-volume work on Hebrews which focused on covenant theology. Part of this work was published posthumously. On his deathbed, Owen rejoiced that he would soon see "his beloved."

### **Relevance to Today**

There seems to have been a revival of real spiritual interest in Puritan theology over the past several decades, especially among young conservatives. Perhaps this is because as these conservatives realize the poverty and shallowness of much contemporary teaching, they find in the Puritans like Jonathan Edwards and John Owen models of rich biblical commitment and spiritual depth. Still, there remains a prejudice against Puritans, captioned in the witty definition of Puritanism as "the suspicion that someone, somewhere, is having fun." Puritans were indeed suspicious of frivolity, and the deep connections some of them held between the scripture and practical life made them seem, especially through the eyes of the particularly frivolous twentieth and twenty-first century generations, dour. Moreover, the commitment of many Puritans to Calvinist principles also consigned them to the waste heap of irrelevant dogma for many Southern Baptists I have known, though these people are often glad to admit and defend the Christian influence of the Puritan pilgrims on the character of our nation.

For those readers who are glad to recover some depth and breadth in their spiritual and intellectual lives, John Owen is a challenge who rewards study. His lifetime engagement with matters of state show that he was a man relevant to his own time, which is encouraging to Christians who often feel that the Bible has nothing to say to the nation. His commitment to Protestant Orthodoxy is a model for those who believe that doctrine like the personhood of Christ and his atonement for sin, justification by faith, church polity, and the sovereignty of God in salvation are worth understanding and defending. What keeps all of Owen readable and accessible is his pastoral concern for the holiness of Christians. While nimble in abstractions, Owen's teaching, preaching, and lobbying always came down to the way the gospel ought to bear on a human soul and affect its standing before God.

### Views of Church and State

John Owen is important as a pastor and theologian who was deeply involved in the events of his time, yet never allowed his times to define him. Like many Puritan Republicans, he had a millennialist hope that God was bringing about His kingdom on earth through England. When the republic failed, Owen's faith remained in God, and his exegesis remained unshaken. Rather than believing that God had not been at work, he concluded that, because of their sin, the faithful had missed their opportunity to bring God's kingdom to earth. There are many who criticize the Puritans and other believers who interpret the events of their own time through Biblical lenses and dare to believe that they are carrying out God's historical progress in their own time. Such a position is, of course, audacious, and yet, so is faith itself.

Owen avoided uncritical commitment to any cause during a time when causes and views abounded. His belief that the Protectorate was God's will was based on his judgment that Charles I's execution was God's judgment against the house of Stuart. The mid-seventeenth century was a time of political and religious radicalism that gave rise to such groups as the Levellers, who believed in a total reconstruction of society that would elevate the common people. Another group, the Fifth Monarchists, believed that Jesus Christ would return in 1666 to be the next King of England and of the whole world. Though either group may have been glad to claim Owen as one of them, he avoided both of these radical views. Additionally, Owen avoided the Calvinist pitfall that often accompanies overassurance; he did not justify all events and decisions of Parliament and the Protectorate as the divinely inspired acts of God's will. He held the

Parliament to high standards of duty based on his biblical interpretation of the role of the state, and specifically, he held them to high standards of duty to the gospel. In 1652, Owen preached before Parliament including these points about their Christian responsibilities:

1. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has a right to be preached and propagated in every nation and to every creature under heaven.
2. Wherever the Gospel is by any nation owned, received, embraced, it is the blessing, benefit, prosperity and advantage of that nation.
3. The rejection of the Gospel by any people or nation to whom it is tendered is always attended with the certain and inevitable destruction of that people or nation; which, sooner or later, shall, without any help or deliverance, be brought upon them by the revenging hand of Christ.
4. It is the duty of magistrates to seek the good, peace and prosperity of the people committed to their charge, and to prevent, obviate, remove, take away everything that will bring confusion, destruction, desolation upon them; as Mordecai procured good things for his people and prosperity for his kindred. Esther 10:3.
5. Although the institutions and examples of the Old Testament, of the duty of magistrates in the things about the worship of God, are not in their whole latitude and extent to be drawn into rules that should be obligatory to all magistrates now, under the administration of the Gospel ... yet, doubtless, there is something moral in those institutions, which, being unclothed of their Judaical form, is still binding to all in the like kind, as to some analogy and proportion.<sup>1</sup>

As seen from this outline, Owen's view of the state put the church first, and the state in a second, administrative and protective position. A nation blessed by the gospel had responsibilities to its people, and even to the rest of the world, which is consonant with the principle that to whom much is given, much will be required.

Owen was a legitimist in that he believed in the rights of government to rule, but his commitment to Protestant Biblicism gave him the moral courage and intellectual capacity to stand up to governments when he felt they encroached on Christian freedom. Thus, when the monarchy was restored in 1660, Owen did not refuse to comply or acknowledge the King, but he did remain a conscientious objector to laws that prevented what he felt were laws that prevented the free exercise of religion. As mentioned before, Owen was a "non-conformist," meaning he

refused to be a member of the official state church; there were several kinds of Protestant non-conformists, including Presbyterians, Quakers and Baptists. Owen was of the special breed of Congregationalists, the principles of which are summarized by one author as, “the separation of the true church from worldliness and the State, the mutual edification of the members in the love of Christ by the Word of God, the voluntary nature of membership, and the pursuit of individual sanctification towards a conformity to the mind of Christ.” Voluntary membership and assembly were key to Owen’s view of a pure church, and these views were tried under the Conventicle Act of 1670, which forbade such gatherings at the risk of fines and loss of property. While Owen was protected from serious harm by this law, some of his friends, like John Bunyan and Richard Baxter, were imprisoned because of it. He spoke out in their defense on multiple occasions, most notably in a 1680 essay written to Parliament.

#### Commitment to Protestant Orthodoxy

Though many theologians and pastors have upheld protestant orthodoxy, Owen engaged in debate about issues which could easily have seemed resolved by enough time and consensus. Rather than allow controversy to take any hold, under his watch, Owen defended the hard-won tenets of Protestant orthodoxy, like Christ’s atoning death in 1650 publication, the divine origin of the Bible in a 1659 treatise, and the Lord’s Day in a 1670 writing.

Protestantism itself, defined as freedom from the acknowledgement that the Roman Catholic church was the one Universal church, was almost an *a priori* commitment for Owen. Like other protestant non-conformists before the Protectorate, he opposed Archbishop Laud of the Anglican church because he was convinced that Laud wanted the church of England to return to his Catholic roots. Even after the Restoration, Owen continued to preach and teach against Roman Catholicism, as the title of a 1679 publication, *The Church of Rome No Safe Guide*, indicates. One of the ways in which his anti-Roman Catholic views were made practical was that during his tenure at Oxford he worked to remove high-church ritual from chapel assemblies and required that students and teachers not wear any special vestments. Controversy ensued at Oxford over the use of the Lord’s Prayer in worship services. Owen maintained that he felt the prayer had the right to a central place in Christian worship as a model, rather than as a mantra to be recited at every gathering.

Over time, Owen became more convinced of the truthfulness of Calvinist principles, and his engagement in their defense was as adamant as his arguments against Roman Catholicism. As mentioned earlier, his first major publication was a treatise against Arminianism, which he felt would lead to an overthrow of all serious acknowledgement of God's sovereignty. He also defended the doctrine of the endurance of the saints in a publication in 1654.

Although men with commitments like Owen's are often perceived, and in reality truly are, polemicists who love nothing more than constant controversy, Owen was committed to unity among non-conformists and freedom of religious expression for those with whom he disagreed. In the interregnum, and afterward, when the status of churches was unclear and the unofficial churches under political threat, he advocated for unity based on "[a]ffectionate, sincere love in all things, without dissimulation towards one another, like that which Christ bare to His Church."

### Pastoral Concern for Holiness

Throughout his life and service, Owen continued to give attention to the personal spiritual life of the saints. Holiness is a concern that runs throughout his political and religious writings, but it is perhaps the most prominent in his works on the Christian's battle with sin and temptation: *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656), *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It* (1658), and *Indwelling Sin in Believers* (1658). Jerry Bridges claimed that "John Owen's treatises on *Indwelling Sin in Believers* and *The Mortification of Sin* are, in my opinion, the most helpful writings on personal holiness ever written," and J.I. Packer, who has written on Owen extensively, claims, "I owe more to John Owen than to any other theologian, ancient or modern; and I owe more to [*The Mortification of Sin*] than to anything else he wrote." These books may also ironically be his most "Puritanical" works due their scrutinizing of the soul and its desires. Yet this scrutinizing is not unbiblical and in fact is much needed today.

In the preface to *The Mortification of Sin*, Owen observed in his day a "great disability of dealing with temptations" among those professing Christianity, which resulted in scandal to the gospel. He took as his text Romans 8:13: "If you through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body you shall live." He argued then, that Christians had a duty to mortify sin through the power of the Holy Spirit. The neglect of this duty would have disastrous effects on the person of the believer, who might be saved eventually, yet live miserable and fearful his entire life. The Holy

Spirit's roles in this process is to provide the spiritual graces which fight against the flesh, to weaken the power of sin at its root, and to give the believer communion with Christ through His cross. He defines mortification as consisting in a) a habitual weakening of sin; b) constant fighting and contending against sin, and c) frequent success.

He then lays down the principles of the ways and means of mortification. First of all, only a believer can achieve mortification. Secondly, "sincerity and diligence in a universality of obedience" are required. In this section he points out that maintaining any pet sins will prevent the mortification of any sin. He then begins to describe some practices that tend to the desired end, which include an analysis of the degree of danger of one's sin, a clear view of one's personal guilt, longing for deliverance from it, and consideration of one's natural proclivities. For this last, some have considered him to be quite a psychologist, because this requires a person to consider what type of person they are. For instance, if a person has an "artistic temperament," it is neither good nor bad in itself, but it certainly lends itself to introspection and moodiness. These can be used by God to produce great works of intellectual and moral depth, but can also lead a person to be self-absorbed and unkind. In a most interesting section, Owen urges believers not to quiet their hearts about any sin until God's convicting work is through and the Holy Spirit pronounces peace from God. This is an antidote against overly positive self-talk that prevents a lot of honest soul-searching endeavor.

Owen concludes with instructions for the work itself, which he acknowledges "are very few." They are:

1. Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of your sin.
2. Raise up your heart by faith to an expectation of relief from Christ.
3. Consider His mercifulness, tenderness, and kindness, as he is our High Priest at the right hand of God.
4. Consider His faithfulness who has promised; which may raise you up and confirm you in this waiting in an expectation of relief.

In these instructions Owen's heart is clear: he desires that believers have all the true comfort available to them in their struggle against sin. In that this struggle leads to life, he also urged its prosecution for the sake of eternal reward.

It is interesting to note that *The Mortification of Sin* was the written form of sermons delivered while he was in office at Oxford. It is unlikely that teenagers and young adults are

essentially different now than they were three hundred and fifty years ago. They, and adults alike, struggle with real sin and real temptation which can cripple their spiritual growth and haunt their consciences with a fear of eternal lostness. To the extent that Owen was able, he sought to put things straight for his audiences and readers.

### **Conclusion**

As previously stated, reading John Owen is both a challenge and a reward. The challenge is that his language and assumptions are based in a world so removed from even the most orthodox and serious of today's Christian circles. His instructions seem at times pietistic and his assumptions, at times, audacious. Yet, in Owen we have a man who models real faith in action. To thoroughly understand Owen one must not look at only his political involvements in the exciting Republican period of English history. Though of greatest interest to historians, it was a parenthetical period surrounded by consistent commitments to Protestant Biblicism and the holiness of Christ's church.

Notes:

I relied on the collection of materials available on [Johnowen.org](http://Johnowen.org) for research, which includes numerous books and articles online, including Peter Toon's biography, *John Owen: God's Statesman*, which I used for biographical information.