

AN
INTRODUCTION
TO

JOHN
OWEN

A
CHRISTIAN VISION
FOR EVERY STAGE
OF LIFE



CRAWFORD GRIBBEN



“In the relatively brief compass of this fresh approach to the core intellectual ideas of John Owen, Crawford Gribben has written what amounts to a must-read work about the *mentalité* of this theological colossus. A fabulous achievement!”

Michael A. G. Haykin, Chair and Professor of Church History, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Studying John Owen’s life and theology is like visiting a vast food buffet—delicious but overwhelming, resulting in satisfaction but also a sense that one missed quite a lot. Crawford Gribben serves up a sampler plate with an engaging blend of biography and doctrine flavored with the pervasive sauce of Owen’s view of godliness and spiced with Gribben’s own interpretation of Owen’s story. This book is a helpful introduction to one of the greatest theologians our world has known and a healthy enticement to feed on Owen’s writings for a lifetime.”

Joel R. Beeke, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; author, *Reformed Preaching*; coauthor, *Reformed Systematic Theology*

“Crawford Gribben draws on expertise gathered over years of work on John Owen to paint a picture that is both deeply scholarly and extremely readable. Looking at different stages of human life through the prism of Owen’s personal experience and theological writings, the book gives a striking new perspective on this significant Reformed theologian. It’s an excellent introduction to Owen.”

Susan Hardman Moore, Professor of Early Modern Religion, School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh; author, *Pilgrims: New World Settlers and the Call of Home*

“John Owen is one of the most remarkable figures to emerge out of seventeenth-century England. His writings span a wide range of topics, from Trinitarian theology and religious toleration to educational reform and personal piety. While recent scholarship has helped us reevaluate Owen in significant ways, a one-dimensional portrait of the Puritan often emerges, whether as a timeless theologian or as an outdated historical figure. Crawford Gribben’s book excels at situating Owen’s theology in the times in which he wrote. The result is not only a stimulating exercise in biographical theology but also a compelling vision of the Christian life. For those wanting to get to know Owen the man as well as Owen the theologian, this book is the best place to start.”

John W. Tweeddale, Academic Dean and Professor of Theology, Reformation Bible College; author, *John Owen and Hebrews*

“This is a beautifully written book. It is accessible and uplifting, blending the highest scholarship with deep devotion. Gribben presents John Owen in a fresh new light. It has something for those who are new to Owen as well as for those who have read him for a lifetime. Gribben’s introduction is an essential, life-giving guide to a great man whose influence is still with us.”

Tim Cooper, Associate Professor of Church History, University of Otago, New Zealand; author, *John Owen, Richard Baxter, and the Formation of Nonconformity*

An Introduction to John Owen



John Donne

AN
INTRODUCTION
TO
JOHN
OWEN

A
CHRISTIAN VISION
FOR EVERY STAGE
OF LIFE



CRAWFORD GRIBBEN

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

An Introduction to John Owen: A Christian Vision for Every Stage of Life

Copyright © 2020 by Crawford Gribben

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

This book quotes from manuscript material in the possession of the Bodleian Library, Inspire Nottinghamshire Archives, and Dr. Williams's Library. Used by permission.

Portions of this book are drawn from Crawford Gribben, "John Owen (1616–1683): Four Centuries of Influence," *Reformation Today* 273 (September–October 2016): 10–18. Used by permission of *Reformation Today*.

Cover design: Jordan Eskovitz

Cover image: Portrait by John Greenhill, National Portrait Gallery, London.

First printing 2020

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the *King James Version* (KJV) of the Bible.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-6965-4

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-6968-5

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-6966-1

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-6967-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gribben, Crawford, author.

Title: An introduction to John Owen : a Christian vision for every stage of life / Crawford Gribben.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019032178 (print) | LCCN 2019032179 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433569654

(trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433569661 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433569678 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433569685 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Owen, John, 1616–1683. | Spiritual life—Christianity. | Grace (Theology)

Classification: LCC BX5207.O88 G748 2020 (print) | LCC BX5207.O88 (ebook) | DDC 230/.59092—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019032178>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019032179>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

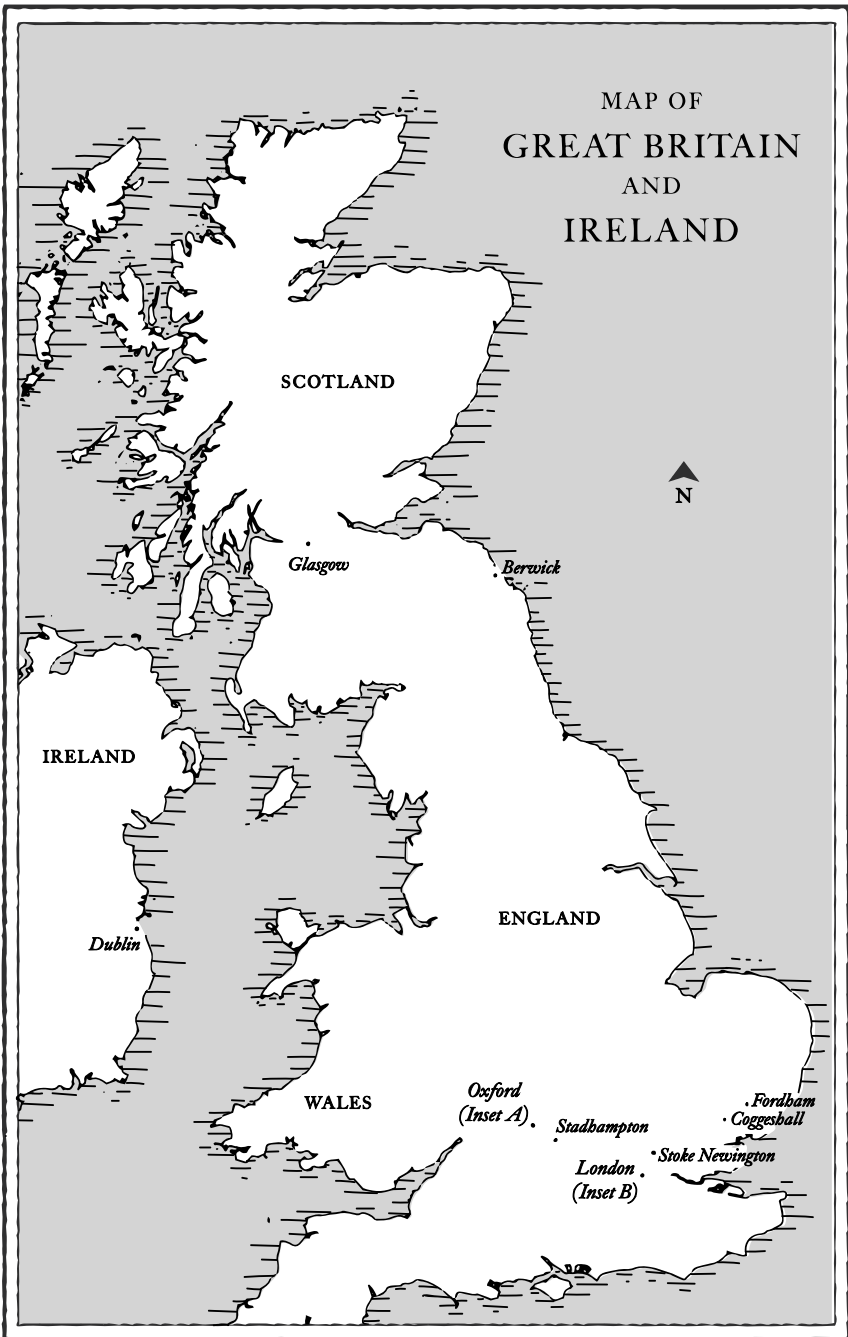
VP 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Pauline, Daniel, Honor, Finn, and Samuel

Contents

Maps	10
Preface	13
Time Line	17
Bibliographic Note	23
Introduction	25
1 Childhood	47
2 Youth	71
3 Middle Age	91
4 Death and Eternal Life	117
Conclusion	143
Appendix	155
Prayers for Children from John Owen, <i>The Primer</i> (1652)	
Bibliography	159
General Index	183
Scripture Index	189

MAP OF
GREAT BRITAIN
AND
IRELAND



SCOTLAND

IRELAND

ENGLAND

WALES

Glasgow

Berwick

Dublin

Oxford
(Inset A)

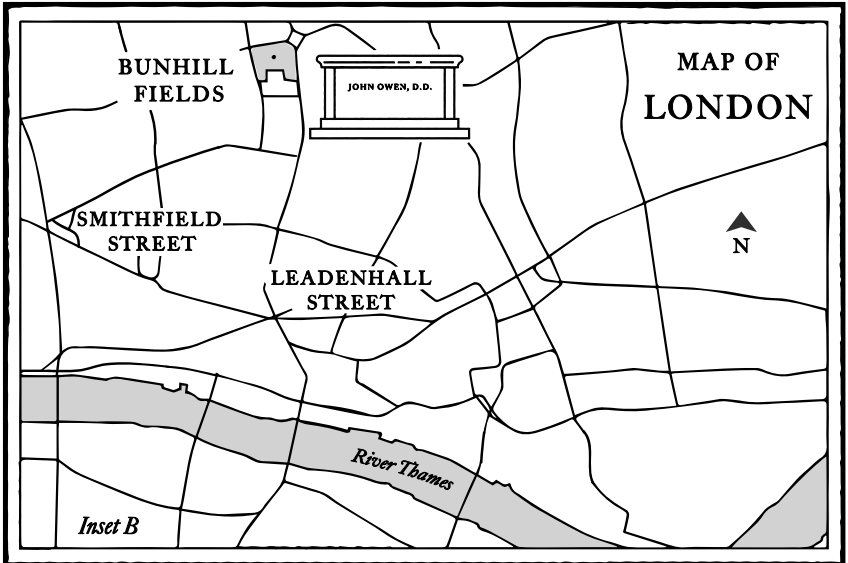
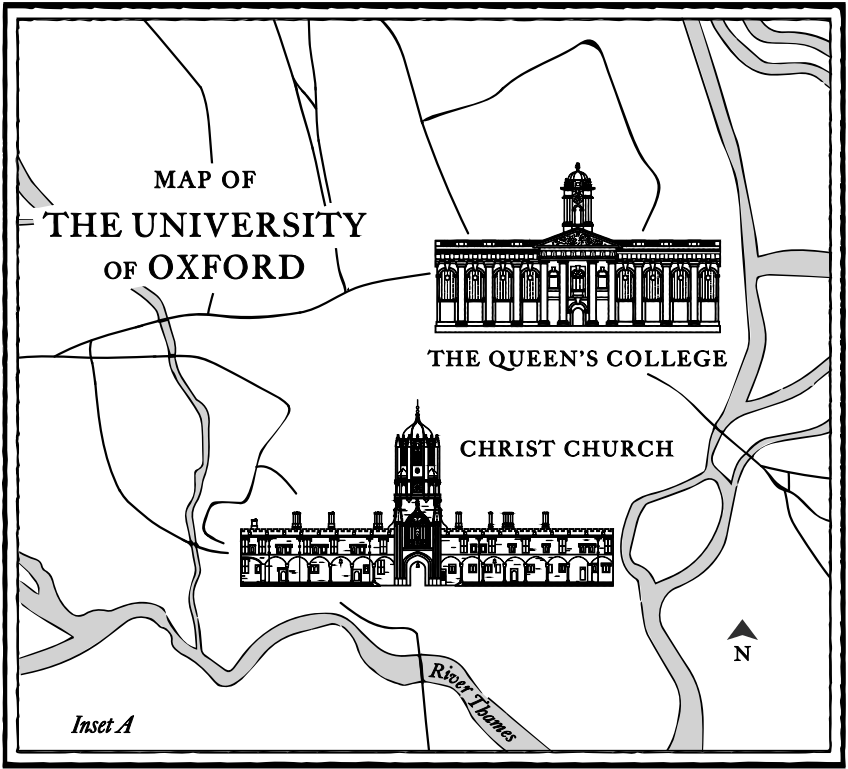
Stadhampton

London
(Inset B)

Stoke Newington

Fordham
Coggeshall





Preface

John Owen (1616–1683) was the greatest—and certainly the most formidable—of English Protestant theologians. This book is an introduction to his work, but it is not an attempt at theological weight lifting. Instead, it is about Owen’s description of the spiritual lives of his ideal readers. Its driving force is not Owen’s biography, which I reconstructed in *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat* (2016). Instead, it sets out to discover the kind of life he hoped his readers would experience. For Owen, spiritual life was about increasing in grace and goodness, in fellowship with each person of the Trinity, in the local and visible, catholic and invisible fellowship of the church, in the context of an often hostile world. Divine grace was always experienced in a social, cultural, and political context and made a contribution to it. The good life would be enabled by divine grace and would extend that grace to others.

I owe the idea for this approach to Carey Newman, who suggested to me that an introduction to Owen should do more than work through his responses to major debates in the Reformed tradition. After all, there already exists a great deal of historical-theological work in this field, and readers can find in the bibliography major expositions of most of the central themes in Owen’s work. Much of this work is extremely

valuable in understanding Owen's achievements. But this book sets out to do something new. If my work *John Owen and English Puritanism* was an exercise in theological biography, the present project might be regarded as an exercise in biographical theology. It considers the kind of Christian life that Owen wanted to promote, showing some of the unexpected ways in which he articulated his famously high Calvinism and how he expected it to play out in the lives of those he influenced. Its chapters discuss some of the best-known and least-known of Owen's works, which I have chosen to focus on as works that treat especially his concerns about the distinctive challenges of successive stages of the Christian life. From infancy to death—and beyond—Owen described the spiritual life as being sustained by and sustaining others in grace.

This book builds on, and occasionally modifies, more than two decades of reading and writing about Owen and his contexts. I first encountered Owen's works in the mid-1990s, during my doctoral studies, under the guidance of Michael Bath of the University of Strathclyde and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin of Trinity College Dublin. I have since published a biography of Owen, as well as a number of articles and chapters on his significance, and I've updated the conclusions of several of those works here. In the intervening years, my thinking about Owen has been stimulated by John Coffey, Tim Cooper, Sinclair Ferguson, Michael Haykin, and John Tweeddale, while my reading of early modern literature, history, and theology has been guided and informed by colleagues including Matt Bingham, Ian Campbell, Chris Caughey, R. Scott Clark, Martyn Cowan, Scott Dixon, Darryl Hart, Ariel Hessayon, Andrew Holmes, Neil Keeble, Richard Muller, Graeme Murdock, Amanda Piesse, Murray Pittock, Ian Campbell Ross, Nigel Smith, Scott Spurlock, Mark Sweetnam, and Joe Webster. I am grateful to

Michael Haykin to reuse material that I initially published in an issue of *Reformation Today*, which he edited, and to the Bodleian Library, Inspire Nottinghamshire Archives, and Dr. Williams's Library for permission to quote from manuscript material in their possession. Most important, my reading of Owen's work has been something I have shared with members of my family, who are "heirs together of the grace of life" and to whom this book is dedicated.

Owen understood that the "praise of God's grace . . . ought to be the end of all our Writing and Reading in this world."¹ This book describes Owen's suggestions as to how that grace should flow through the Christian life, from birth to the beatific vision, as the gift of the one who is the source, guide, and goal of all things: *Mar is uaidh agus is tríd agus is chuige atá gach ní dá bhfuil ann. Moladh go deo leis* (Rom. 11:36).

Crawford Gribben
Tulaigh na Mullán, December 2019

1. John Owen, "Dr. Owen to the Reader," in Henry Scudder, *The Christians Daily Walk* (London, 1674), sig. A2v.

Time Line

- 1616 Owen is born in Stadhampton, Oxfordshire.
- 1626 Owen enters Edward Sylvester's school, Oxford.
- 1628 Owen enters the Queen's College, Oxford.
- 1632 Owen graduates with a bachelor of arts and is ordained as a deacon by John Bancroft, bishop of Oxford.
- 1635 Owen graduates with a master of arts.
- 1637 Owen leaves Oxford without clear prospects for employment.
- 1638 Owen is ordained as a priest by John Bancroft, bishop of Oxford.
- 1641–1642 Owen acts as chaplain for Sir Robert Dormer of Ascot and John, Lord Lovelace of Hurley.
- 1642 With the outbreak of civil war, Owen leaves the Lovelace household, takes lodgings near Smithfield, London, and gains assurance of salvation under the preaching of an unknown minister.
- 1643 Owen publishes his first book, *A Display of Arminianism*, becomes minister of Fordham, Essex, and marries Mary Rooke.
- 1644 Owen's first son, John, is born.
- 1645 Owen publishes his two catechisms.

- 1646 Owen becomes minister of Coggeshall, Essex, and preaches to the House of Commons for the first time at the conclusion of the First Civil War.
- 1647 Owen's daughters Mary and Elizah die.
- 1648 Owen's son Thomas dies. The Second Civil War erupts, and Owen's attendance at and preaching after the siege of Colchester brings him to the attention of Thomas, Lord Fairfax; into the orbit of the army; and ultimately to the attention of Oliver Cromwell. Owen publishes *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*.
- 1649 After the trial and execution of Charles I, England becomes a republic. Owen preaches to members of Parliament (MPs) on the day after the regicide and comes to national attention. Owen's only surviving child, John, dies. Owen meets Oliver Cromwell and joins his invasion of Ireland; he spends the autumn preaching and writing in Dublin, while the army subjugates the island in a series of controversial actions, and for the first time he notes that his ministry has been attended by conversions.
- 1650 Owen returns home to the birth of a daughter, Mary, who is by then his only living child, and almost immediately joins Cromwell's summer invasion of Scotland; he preaches in Berwick and debates with Presbyterians in Glasgow.
- 1651 Owen's daughter Elizabeth is born, and Owen is appointed as dean of Christ Church, University of Oxford.
- 1652 Owen preaches at the state funeral of Henry Ireton, Cromwell's son-in-law. He chairs the committee that reports on the errors of the Racovian Catechism and begins to define the theological boundaries of a national religious settlement in *The Humble Proposals*; he publishes *The Primer* and is appointed vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford.

- 1653 Owen's regular preaching in Oxford is recorded by students, including Thomas Aldersey.
- 1654 Owen becomes a "trier" and adjudicates which preachers should be supported by the state. He is noted as being out of sympathy with the increasingly conservative direction of the government of the republic; is elected as an MP to the first Protectoral Parliament, where he is associated with republican critics of the Cromwellian regime; but is almost immediately forced to resign his seat on account of his being ordained. Owen publishes *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance*.
- 1655 Owen raises forces in Oxford to combat a royalist rising, publishes his anti-Socinian polemic *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, and takes part in discussion about the readmittance of the Jews.
- 1656 Two of Owen's sons, whose names are not recorded, die. Owen publishes *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*.
- 1657 Owen publishes *Of Communion with God*. Reflecting his increasing concern about the direction of government, he writes a statement on behalf of republican army officers to oppose the proposition that Cromwell should be offered the crown. Owen's term as vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford is not renewed, though his leadership of Christ Church continues.
- 1658 Owen publishes *Of Temptation*, several books on schism, and discussions of the nature of Scripture. Oliver Cromwell dies, and his son Richard succeeds him as Lord Protector. Owen and other Independents revise the Westminster Confession as a national statement of faith that becomes known as the Savoy Declaration. Owen walks in the procession attending Cromwell's funeral alongside other civil servants, including John Milton, Andrew Marvell, and John Dryden.

- 1659 Owen preaches his last sermon to MPs and gathers a congregation at Wallingford House, London, from which he coordinates responses of army republicans to increasing political chaos and fears of renewed civil war. Owen corresponds with George Monck, commander of the army in Scotland, who is marching south, about his intentions regarding the political settlement, but Monck plays for time while also communicating with the exiled king.
- 1660 Owen leaves Christ Church and returns to Stadhamp-ton, where he gathers a church in his home. Monck's march south provokes panic in London, which is followed by desertions from the army in England, and so enables the return and restoration of Charles II. Owen is not listed among those to suffer exemplary punishment for their participation in the revolution, but some of his political and religious colleagues experience public deaths of extraordinary cruelty, following which their dismembered corpses are displayed around London.
- 1661 Uncertain of how to understand the sudden reversal of his hopes, Owen publishes *Theologoumena Pantodapa* and turns away from scholastic theology.
- 1662 After the Act of Uniformity, around 2,500 ministers leave the national church to become dissenters and to suffer under a series of laws that become known as the Clarendon Code. Trying to evade arrest, not always successfully, Owen and his wife live apart from their surviving children in the homes of several well-connected patrons. Owen publishes *Ani-madversions on a Treatise Intituled Fiat Lux*, which seems to reverse some of his previous commitments, and *A Discourse concerning Liturgies*, which re-states them.

- 1664 Owen's daughter Judith dies. Owen gathers a church in the home of the Fleetwood family, in Stoke Newington, where Sir John Hartopp begins to take notes on his preaching.
- 1665–1666 The Great Plague, a major outbreak of the bubonic plague, kills around 25 percent of the population of London. Owen's son Matthew dies.
- 1666 The Great Fire of London devastates the housing of tens of thousands of the capital's inhabitants. Owen, like other dissenters, discerns God's providential judgment on his persecutors.
- 1667 Owen publishes pamphlets arguing for political liberties for dissenters and *A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God*.
- 1668 Owen publishes the first of several volumes of his commentary on Hebrews.
- 1669 Owen publishes his commentary on Psalm 130.
- 1672 Charles II issues a Declaration of Indulgence, which offers greater liberties to Protestant dissenters and Catholics but which is extremely controversial among supporters of the Church of England.
- 1673 Parliament forces Charles to withdraw the indulgence and imposes the first Test Act, which requires those taking part in public life to attend Communion in an Anglican church. Owen's small congregation, based around the Fleetwood family, joins with the much larger congregation that had been led by Joseph Caryl, who had recently died, and they gather in their premises on Leadenhall Street, London. Lucy Hutchinson and Sir John Hartopp take notes on Owen's preaching.
- 1674 Owen publishes *A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit*.

- 1676 Owen publishes *The Nature of Apostasy*.
- 1677 Owen's first wife, Mary, dies. Owen publishes *The Doctrine of Justification*, helps secure the release from prison of John Bunyan, and marries Dorothy D'Oyley, a member of his congregation.
- 1681 Owen publishes *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*.
- 1682 Owen's last surviving child, Mary (b. 1650), dies.
- 1683 Owen declines in health, dies, and is buried in Bunhill Fields, London.

Bibliographic Note

The Works of John Owen, edited by William H. Goold, 24 volumes (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850–1855), remains the standard edition of Owen's works. It has been almost entirely reprinted in facsimile as *The Works of John Owen*, edited by William H. Goold (1850–1855; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965–1968), but the reprint edition does not contain Goold's volume 17, and it reorganizes the content of his volume 16. Nevertheless, throughout this book, I refer to the edition of *The Works of John Owen* that is kept in print by the Banner of Truth, which is the most widely available edition of Owen's works.

Introduction

By any account, John Owen (1616–1683) was extraordinary.¹ Not only was he one of the most learned, insightful, and influential English Puritan theologians, he was also one of the most important, and certainly one of the most voluminous, seventeenth-century writers. His eight million words were published in eighty separate titles and ranged from a short Latin poem in praise of Oliver Cromwell to the longest and one of the most technically demanding commentaries that has ever been published on the New Testament epistle to the Hebrews. Best known for his defense of high Calvinism, Owen wrote extensively in favor of religious toleration. Often regarded as a scholastic theologian, Owen cited classical writers, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Dante Alighieri to make theological points, while amassing one of the largest and most diverse private libraries of the seventeenth century and knowing and collecting the works of its best-known poets. While often ambitious to make his own mark, he facilitated the literary careers of other writers, including Andrew Marvell and John Bunyan. Austere and sometimes

1. This chapter develops a short biography that was published as Crawford Gribben, “John Owen: Four Centuries of Influence,” *Reformation Today* 273 (September–October 2016), 10–18, with the permission of the editor. For a more complete biography, where sources for these arguments may be found and fuller citations are provided, see Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

distant, he surrounded himself with friends and rivals of the quality of John Milton and Lucy Hutchinson. Sustaining long-term literary feuds with fellow Puritans like Richard Baxter, he was able to cultivate supportive relationships with former political enemies, including the Earl of Oxford and perhaps even Charles II and James, Duke of York. And he developed the ideas from which his erstwhile student John Locke would fashion the classical liberalism that lies at the heart of modern democratic culture.

These achievements were significant, but they were achieved alongside Owen's day job. In the 1640s, while England was engaged in two civil wars, he worked as a parish minister in Essex and established himself as a preacher of national importance. In the 1650s, during the short-lived English republic, he undertook a series of senior administrative positions in the University of Oxford while serving on a government committee that was tasked with creating a new national church. In the early 1660s, while many of his friends were hung, drawn, and quartered as victims of the restored administration of Charles II, he worked hard to evade persecution and to build bridges with former enemies. And from the later 1660s until his death, as hostility toward religious dissenters began to dissipate, he settled down to look after small Independent congregations, while intervening in the theological disputes that, he feared, were undermining the health of the dissenting churches at a time when God's judgment was being poured out on the nation and the future of English Protestantism was imperiled.

As these achievements suggest, Owen must have been one of the most productive inhabitants of early modern England. He certainly considered how to make his work efficient. In his writing, he took shortcuts, recycled material between separately published titles, lifted primary sources from recently published

anthologies of quotations, and employed a research assistant, Henry Stubbe, on at least one occasion.² But his approach to time management was resolutely theological. He encouraged Christians to think carefully about their use of time. He was confident that “God gives us enough time for all that he requires of us” and that believers should balance what has to be completed against the time available to complete it.³ He recognized the danger of overwork as well as the danger of underachievement: “Many men . . . trifle away their time and their souls, sowing the wind of empty hopes.”⁴ Most Puritans, encouraged by preachers who feared their listeners were never doing enough, faced the opposite temptation. Owen promoted balance. He understood that not all work was good work and that an overbusy life could encroach on the privilege of walking with God. He advised those Christians who struggled with competing responsibilities that “it is more tolerable that our duties of holiness and regard to God should intrench on the duties of our callings and employments in this world” than vice versa.⁵ For God never calls us to “take more upon us than we have time well to perform it in.”⁶ It was grace, rather than activity, that sustained the busyness of true spirituality: “You may take this measure with you in all your duties;—if they increase to a reverence of God, they are from grace; if they do not, they are from gifts, and no way sanctify the soul wherein they are.”⁷ Owen was extraordinary, but he called on his readers to be extraordinary too, for he was

2. For a discussion of Owen’s secondhand quotations, see Richard Snoddy, “A Display of Learning? Citations and Shortcuts in John Owen’s *A Display of Arminianism* (1643),” *Westminster Theological Journal* (forthcoming); Jane Stevenson, “Introduction,” in *The Works of Lucy Hutchinson*, ed. Elizabeth Clarke, David Norbrook, and Jane Stevenson, with textual introductions by Jonathan Gibson and editorial assistance from Mark Burden and Alice Eardley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2:298.

3. Owen, *Works*, 6:230.

4. Owen, *Works*, 2:187.

5. Owen, *Works*, 6:230.

6. Owen, *Works*, 6:230.

7. Owen, *Works*, 9:344.

sure that the God who “gives us enough time for all that he requires” would weave the providence that would enable his readers’ spiritual lives.

Yet for all his success, Owen’s life was marked by sustained tragedy. He endured long periods of ill health and in the mid-1650s was thought to be on his deathbed. He was bereaved of each of his ten children, from 1647 to 1682, and of his first wife, in 1677. His second marriage, to a wealthy widow who was a member of his small congregation, may not always have been happy. For over two decades, after 1660, he pursued his ministry on the margins of the law. Owen’s life was characterized by his experience of defeat. It was, in many ways, the perfect context for his consideration of the spiritual life as a life sustained by grace.

Owen’s Life

Owen was born sometime in 1616 to a family living in the tiny village of Stadhampton, in Oxfordshire. The family was not especially wealthy, and neither were they especially rigorous in their religious views, despite the fact that Owen’s father was a clergyman of the established church. Late in life, Owen described his father as “a Nonconformist all his days, and a painful labourer in the vineyard of the Lord,” but it is not clear that his father was committed to any program of reform within the English church in the 1610s and 1620s.⁸ Owen’s father was not among those Puritans whose dissatisfaction with the Church of England drove them into exile in the Netherlands or the New World, for he remained within the ecclesiastical establishment, apparently neglecting to fulfill some aspects of his liturgical duties, as was common among the party of conforming Puritans, whose hopes for further reformation had ended shortly after

8. Owen, *Works*, 13:224.

the accession of James I. Owen's description of his father may reflect the kindness of a dimmed memory, a filial piety that wanted to distinguish him from those elements of the liturgical practice of the established church that Owen, throughout his life, found most objectionable. Rather than being the heir of a radical tradition, therefore, Owen grew up in a religious community that had worked hard for the reformation of the Church of England and had failed. He remembered, as a boy, being told defamatory stories about "Brownists and Puritans," which he later found out to be false.⁹ Owen grew up knowing the bitter reality of defeat.

Owen's sense of the marginal status of the religious community to which he belonged would have been confirmed during his university studies in the Queen's College, Oxford, which he commenced at the age of twelve, in 1628. This was not an especially young age at which to begin university education in the early seventeenth century—and in fact, the English universities were admitting a higher proportion of young men than in many other periods. But this expansion of university education came alongside the introduction of a number of controversial structural changes that made Owen's college days tumultuous. During the late 1620s and 1630s, the Queen's College, with the rest of the university, passed through a religious revolution, as the Reformed theological consensus that had dominated theological discussion for several decades was replaced by a new theological system, which seemed to its critics to mimic Catholic styles of worship and which questioned elemental components of English Protestant identity. Within Queen's, the debate provoked threats of violence, with one academic threatening to stab the provost, who was driving forward the controversial liturgical changes. The death threat was a sign of things

9. Owen, *Works*, 8:197.

to come, for England was shortly to enter a long civil war, in which religious ideas would be used to justify horrific levels of violence. Diaries from the period illustrate both the excitement of undergraduate life within the college and the growing pressures for teaching fellows to find ways to shoehorn their old religious principles into the new liturgical mold.

Some of the college community could not accommodate their consciences to the new rules. At the age of twenty-one, nine years after his admission to the Queen's College, Owen had graduated with his bachelor of arts and master of arts degrees and was likely a junior member of the teaching faculty. His hard study had earned him a place among the postgraduate students, and he may have been working toward his bachelor of divinity. But after years of preparation for an academic or clerical career, Owen felt that he had to leave Oxford. He could not support the religious innovations that were being pushed through Queen's with the support of the provost and through the university with the support of the vice-chancellor. The new and fashionable Arminianism ran entirely counter to a number of his convictions. Choosing conscience over career, Owen left the university in 1637.

It is not clear where or how Owen spent the next few years of his life. In the few surviving glimpses of his life during this period, Owen seems to have made erratic and unpredictable decisions. In 1638, within a year of abandoning his academic career, he sought ordination as a priest at the hands of the bishop of Oxford, one of the chief supporters of the Arminian innovations, at an age younger than that permitted by the canons.¹⁰ He then found employment as a chaplain in the home of Sir Robert Dormer, a suspected Catholic whose riotous recreational

10. The details of Owen's ordination used in previous biographical accounts are here corrected by the information contained in the Clergy of the Church of England Database, <https://theclergydatabase.org.uk>, ref. 14413.

activities suggested no sympathy for Puritan views. By 1642, Owen had accepted another position as a household chaplain, this time in the home of Sir John Lovelace. Throughout this period, Owen appears to have been suffering from depression. It is possible that his move to the Lovelace household occurred around the same time that his father and elder brother took up new pastoral charges in the vicinity—though as a cause or consequence of Owen’s movements, we cannot tell. As so often in accounts of Owen’s life, we are left to balance possibilities. But it is possible that members of the family, which appears to have been close-knit, were deliberately regrouping to support their brother in his discouragement and, possibly, fear.

For fear was in the air. In the summer of 1642, England drifted into its First Civil War. That same summer, Owen officiated as household chaplain to a young married couple whose cousin, Richard Lovelace, would become one of the most eminent literary figures within the emerging party of royalists. Dormer and Lovelace, both of whom had employed Owen, declared in favor of the king. Owen, who did not need to express any political preference, decided in favor of Parliament. Having abandoned the university and his first employer, he now left the Lovelace household and the path into pastoral work it represented, and he traveled to London, without obvious prospects and almost entirely without friends. In the capital, one of the largest and most international cities in Europe, Owen found lodgings in Smithfield, a cheap and unpleasant place to live, close to the red-light district and to the place where one century before so many Protestant leaders had been martyred.

It was in this unpromising situation that Owen found his purpose in life. As censorship collapsed, Owen began to write, developing a manuscript on the priesthood of Christ that he never published. More important, he experienced a protracted

crisis of assurance, an experience in which the “law seems sometimes to prevail, sin and Satan to rejoice; and the poor soul is filled with dread about its inheritance.”¹¹ But this dejection was brought to a sudden end in an unexpected manner. Owen was sermon gadding, attending a church service along with his cousin in the hope of listening to preaching by a famous divine. But the famous preacher did not arrive. His replacement seemed to be much less promising, and Owen’s cousin wanted to leave the service to seek better homiletical prospects elsewhere. But Owen, then in one of his periodic bouts of ill health, did not feel well enough to move. He stayed and found the unknown preacher directly addressing his spiritual situation. He never discovered the identity of this man. Under this unknown ministry, and on an unknown date, Owen was born again.

Owen’s conversion came around the same time that he began his career as an author. For the first time, perhaps, he came to understand how the doctrines that had been so fiercely debated during the previous decade could bring peace to his troubled soul. And so, with new resolve, he threw himself into another writing project, *A Display of Arminianism*, which he dedicated to a committee of members of Parliament (MPs) that oversaw the religious health of the nation. It was not an auspicious first publication, for Owen was still learning how to construct an argument with clarity, accuracy, and discretion. It is not clear, as recent scholars have noted, that his depiction of his theological antagonists was entirely fair, and Owen certainly erred in including a prominent Presbyterian member of the Westminster Assembly among his targets.¹² Nevertheless, gaining the attention of his parliamentary patrons, Owen found the support he needed to enter parish ministry.

11. Owen, *Works*, 2:241.

12. Owen, *Works*, 10:22, 76.

The committee of MPs appointed Owen to his first parish, in Fordham, Essex. Finally settling into parish ministry, he became frustrated by the spiritual apathy of his parishioners. Within a few years, he had married a girl from the neighboring village of Coggeshall and had started a family. But in the later 1640s, as poor weather and a series of bad harvests resulted in widespread dearth, and as smallpox raged in the region, John and Mary buried several of their children. At Coggeshall, Owen was initially excited by the possibility of a new start, not least because the parish's previous minister had become a member of the Westminster Assembly. Large crowds came to hear him preach, with some suggestions that over two thousand people attended his sermons. But this was not a sign of an unusual spiritual awakening—his parishioners were legally compelled to attend worship. And within a few years, he was again disappointed by the spiritual condition of his parish and was again lamenting its disorder.

Owen's disappointment with the realities of parish ministry developed as he changed his views on church order. In his early parish ministry, he moved from supporting a rather unformed Presbyterianism to adopting the vision of church life that was then being promoted by Congregationalists. There may have been much less to this movement than some later historians have suggested, for in the period before the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), the "Presbyterian" label was widely applied to those Puritans who pushed for further reform within the Church of England without supporting any detailed manifesto of the organizational changes that might entail. But Owen's growing sense of the need to emphasize the autonomy of individual congregations involved much more than defining his ecclesiological concerns.

Owen's neighbor, the Presbyterian minister Ralph Josselin, recorded in his diary the ways in which the Coggeshall church

was changing. Owen installed an elder, John Sams, and had him preach without any ordination, even as he downplayed the importance of his own ordination. Sams was examined by the Westminster Assembly and supported for ordination several years after he began his ministry as a teaching elder in Owen's congregation. In addition, Owen gathered believers together for weeknight Bible study meetings, in which multiple people participated, in a move that might have been seen to undermine the special status of the congregation's teachers. And Owen also revised his views on the Lord's Supper, moving gradually to the position that the Eucharist should be celebrated weekly, by a gathered church rather than by members of a parish—and this while his neighbor Josselin abandoned the observance of the sacrament for a decade. These were notable departures from the norms of church life in the period—and in Owen's case, as so often in Christian history thereafter, key indicators of an impulse to recover as accurately as possible the order of the New Testament churches. For Owen was also revising his views of baptism, moving steadily away from the very high view of the efficacy of baptism that he outlined in his first publication to adopt in the 1650s a perspective on the sacrament that made sense of his growing sympathy for and cooperation with Baptists.

Owen's new vision of church life developed in startling contrast to the clerical, formal, and liturgical preferences of his Presbyterian colleagues. The Blasphemy Act of 1648, which was supported by Presbyterian MPs and which sought to provide legal safeguards for the achievements of the Westminster Assembly, criminalized adherence to a range of religious opinions, making any defense of believers baptism, for example, a penal offense. The most effective opposition to this Presbyterian theocracy was located in the army, and Owen increasingly iden-

tified himself with the leaders of its opposition to the civilian government that seemed increasingly unlikely to support the kind of reformation of church and state that he had envisaged. In 1648, he witnessed the siege of Colchester, a large town five miles from Coggeshall. It was Owen's first direct experience of the Civil Wars, and it must have been harrowing. Some of the worst war crimes of the period were committed during that long summer siege. But if Owen was disturbed by the crimes against civilians and the horrific mutilation of animals, he did not refer to it in the sermons he preached celebrating the achievements of the parliamentary soldiers and their general, Sir Thomas Fairfax. These sermons brought him to the attention of the army leaders whom he had come to admire. As the political mood darkened and, in the winter of 1648–1649, the king was put on trial and executed, Owen's new patrons within the high military command identified him as the man to commemorate the English Revolution.

For the revolution made Owen. One day after the execution of Charles I, who had been convicted of treason, Owen addressed MPs with an oration that understood, without celebrating, the achievements of regicide. He, like his patrons, had something to gain from the new situation of England. Owen's links with the army pulled him further from parish ministry and brought him into contact with Oliver Cromwell. Owen's relationship with this extraordinary and brilliant military leader was initially very close. He accompanied Cromwell on the invasion of Ireland in 1649, remaining in Dublin, where for the first time he believed his ministry was being attended with conversions. His journey to Scotland in 1650 was more complicated, for he was drawn into the complex politics and internal divisions of the kirk. But the English forces themselves may have begun to fracture: Archibald Johnston of Wariston, the

Scottish Covenanter leader, heard Owen preach in Berwick a sermon that he understood as attacking Cromwell's pride.¹³ In spring 1651, Owen left the army, looking for new opportunities, and was awarded with positions of academic leadership in the university from which he had resigned less than fifteen years earlier.

Owen's return to Oxford in summer 1651 was a moment of triumph. As dean of Christ Church, and later vice-chancellor of the university, Owen was given the opportunity to reshape the institution, to protect Reformed theology, and to promote godliness among the staff and students. He pursued these ends with diligence, generosity, and occasionally with a lack of scruple. It was a difficult and demanding career transition. The move to Oxford had pushed him away from the moral clarity of civil war and into the ambiguous and complex world of academic politics. There is some evidence that he struggled to know how best to negotiate his new environment. Though all these appointments represented the apex of his career, they also represented some of his greatest challenges.

Owen preached and wrote relentlessly throughout his years in Oxford. A number of the books he completed during the 1650s have become spiritual classics, including his devotional handbooks *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656) and *Of Communion with God* (1658). But as his Scottish sermons had earlier suggested, he was also becoming increasingly critical of the government. It was obvious that the army, not Parliament, held the real political power, even as Cromwell's court grew increasingly similar to that of the king it had replaced. Owen grew worried and tried to intervene in a complex political situation. Then, uncharacteristically, he overreached himself. In 1654, he

13. *Diary of Sir Archibald Johnston of Wariston* (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1911), 2:16.

was elected as an MP for the first Protectoral Parliament. In the few months that he spent in the Commons, he was associated with radical republicans, men who were alarmed by the increasingly monarchical trappings of the Cromwell family. Critical observers noted that Owen was among a group of MPs who were of “a contrary judgement to Cromwell.”¹⁴ Within months, Owen was expelled from Parliament on the basis that he was a clergyman and therefore ineligible to sit in the house. But Owen denied the charge: he had rejected his ordination and the ontological difference between clergy and laity that it presupposed.

Back in Oxford, perhaps stinging from this defeat, Owen became ever more critical of the direction being taken by the government. He condemned the frivolity of Cromwell’s court and intervened on behalf of army republicans to stop Cromwell being crowned king. By 1657, the breach with his old patron and friend was complete. Owen did not see Cromwell as he gradually sickened and, in September 1658, died. When Oliver was replaced by Richard, his son, who wished to continue the conservative trend of his father’s administration, Owen moved to gather a congregation of disaffected republicans among the military leadership. The church gathered in Wallingford House, and Philip Nye preached at its constitution, giving Owen a pastoral charge that exhorted him to fulfill the duties of an elder.¹⁵ But this congregation appears to have thrown its efforts into political activities. In a complex series of events, its members worked to undermine the new government before it had any opportunity to consolidate its power. The army had brought down governments before. In fact, several Parliaments since the regicide had been ended by the army’s intervention. But this time, the officers who met at Wallingford House gambled and lost.

14. *Diary of Sir Archibald Johnston of Wariston*, 2:287.

15. Notebook of Smith Fleetwood, MS Comm. 1, pp. 24–36, University of Edinburgh, New College.

Their coup created chaos until Charles II returned. Owen's criticisms of the Cromwellian government had helped undermine it.

The Restoration of the monarchy in May 1660 ended the English Revolution. Its leaders were tried, found guilty of treason, and publicly butchered. Meanwhile, the ejection of Puritan ministers from the Church of England in August 1662 ended any hope that the godly could be accommodated within the established church. Owen, who was in some personal danger, struggled to know how best to respond to the new circumstances. His activities in the early 1660s reveal his mental conflict. In January 1661, while he was leading a conventicle, his house was raided by the local militia, who carried away a half dozen cases of pistols. Throughout the same period, his books advocated a surprising and not entirely consistent range of positions. In *Animadversions on a Treatise Intituled Fiat Lux* (1662) and its *Vindication* (1664), for example, Owen praised the new king as the greatest Protestant in Europe, defended his role as the head of the established church, spoke highly of the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles, and denied the need for imposing confessions of faith. In other publications from this period, he defended Independent church order and called for congregations to strenuously defend confessional Reformed theology. All these works were published anonymously, and some of them were published illegally. Owen was wise to exercise caution. The impaled heads of several of his old friends were still on display in London. There was every chance that he, too, could become a victim of the restored regime.

But the political situation began to settle. By the mid-1660s, after the devastating outbreak of the Great Plague (1665–1666) and the Great Fire (1666), nonconformists gained the courage to return to public preaching, even in London. Owen kept his head down, continued writing, and found time in 1668 to pose for

a portrait by one of the most fashionable of the court painters. By the early 1670s, his situation had changed again. His small congregation, which comprised around thirty individuals, many of them prominent republicans with close links to the party that had undermined the English Revolution, merged with a congregation of around one hundred individuals, which had been led by the recently deceased Puritan preacher Joseph Caryl. They began to meet on the premises that belonged to the larger congregation on Leadenhall Street, London.

Owen's preaching changed to address the new situation. With a more diverse congregation, his sermons were shorter, more focused, and geared very directly to the pastoral needs of his listeners. In many ways, these sermons represent some of the best of his work. He moved away from the extended topical and exegetical series that had featured in his earlier ministry to instead present different themes and passages each week. Perhaps many members of his new congregation had grown tired of the preaching of extended series of sermons—after all, Caryl's exposition of Job had lasted for more than two decades. Owen's new method of preaching drew crowds, and perhaps for the first time, he became a genuinely popular preacher.

We get our clearest view of Owen's pastoral concerns in the materials that survive from this period of his ministry. He found it a terribly difficult time. Now in his early sixties, Owen was surrounded by death. Mary, his wife, died in 1677, and their last surviving child died in 1682. Despite his second marriage, his friends remarked on his continuing depression. He had lost so much—a wife, each of his children, and, he worried, the work of a lifetime. Owen looked across the spectrum of English dissent and persuaded himself that the churches were in ruins. When he died, in August 1683, Owen believed that the Puritan project had failed and that, with the openly Catholic James,

Duke of York, almost certain to succeed his brother as king, the English Reformation was almost over.

Of course, events proved otherwise. The reign of James II generated its own instabilities, creating the panic throughout the political nation that led to his forced abdication and to MPs inviting the invasion of William of Orange (1688). The Glorious Revolution that followed secured the British Protestant constitution, but it did not secure the integrity of the dissenting churches. After his death, Owen's congregation did not long continue in his theological footsteps. Isaac Watts, his successor in the pastoral office, experimented with Trinitarian doctrine to such an extent that, by the 1720s, London Unitarians were suggesting that he had come to support their cause.

But some evangelicals did continue to appreciate Owen's legacy. Surprisingly, perhaps, it was John Wesley who kept Owen's reputation alive when he republished parts of Owen's writing in his *Christian Library* (1750). Throughout the eighteenth century, Scottish publishers kept his ecclesiastical works in print, while a much smaller number of English publishers reprinted his devotional and exegetical works. In the nineteenth century, Owen was praised by the Exclusive Brethren leader William Kelly, even as he was abominated by liberal evangelicals within the Church of Scotland. In the early twentieth century, he found appreciative readers in A. W. Pink in the 1920s and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in the 1930s, both of whom would spearhead the revival of British Calvinism, and also in Jim Eliot, the future missionary martyr, in the early 1950s. And so, when the Banner of Truth republished *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1959), as a prelude to their republication of William Goold's edition of Owen's *Works* (1965–1968), the stage was already set for Owen's recovery. Sixty years later, Owen may have more readers than he ever had before.

Reading Owen

This book is an introduction to Owen's life and thought. It builds on the growing number of studies of his theological work, many of which reflect the concern of Richard A. Muller, and others, to take seriously the intellectual claims of the writers of post-Reformation Reformed dogmatics.¹⁶ Many of these books offer detailed and formidable reconstructions of Owen's formulation of key doctrines. They have considered Owen as a high Calvinist theologian, presenting detailed accounts of his doctrine of God, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.¹⁷ A much smaller body of work has considered his role as preacher to the Long Parliament, as chaplain to the Cromwellian invasions of Ireland and Scotland, as dean of Christ Church, Oxford, as vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford, as architect of the Cromwellian religious settlement, as defender of the toleration of dissenters after the Restoration, and as a widely published author of theological polemic, biblical commentary, and political intervention.¹⁸ This book also draws on work by those authors who have offered new light on

16. Owen is a significant figure in the tradition represented in Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

17. See, for example, Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987); Steve Griffiths, *Redeem the Time: Sin in the Writings of John Owen* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2001); Richard W. Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Heritage Books, 2004); Brian K. Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007); Alan Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology*, T&T Clark Theology (London: T&T Clark, 2007); Lee Gatiss, *From Life's First Cry: John Owen on Infant Baptism and Infant Salvation*, St. Antholin's Lectureship Charity Lecture 2008 (London: Latimer Trust, 2008); Kelly M. Kopic and Mark Jones, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2012); Christopher Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013).

18. See, for example, Crawford Gribben, "Polemic and Apocalyptic in the Cromwellian Invasion of Scotland," *Literature & History* 23, no. 1 (2014): 1–18; Crawford Gribben, "John Owen, Renaissance Man? The Evidence of Edward Millington's *Bibliotheca Oweniana* (1684)," *Westminster Theological Journal* 72, no. 2 (2010): 321–32, reprinted in Kopic and Jones, *Ashgate Research Companion*, 97–109.

Owen's life and work by situating their reconstructions of his ideas within the relevant social, cultural, religious, and institutional contexts. Tim Cooper's masterful account *John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity* (2011) set a new standard for a work in this field, describing the most important relationship—or rivalry—in seventeenth-century dissenting culture. In *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat* (2016), I tried to extend this approach in a more narrowly focused theological biography. More recently, Martyn Cowan's excellent work *John Owen and the Civil War Apocalypse: Preaching, Prophecy and Politics* (2018) has shown how this contextual approach can open up entirely new research questions and can challenge some widely shared assumptions about Owen's convictions and achievements. This contextual approach is still quite new, and most work on Owen continues to focus on the reconstruction of his doctrine, but there are signs of increasing interest in a more rounded appreciation of his life.

These different kinds of works on Owen are mutually enriching and are being developed as audiences for Owen's work are growing and diversifying. Owen is finding increasing numbers of readers within the church. In the last decade, several of his most important titles have been rendered into modern English, and Crossway is undertaking to publish his complete works in modernized language. At the same time, within the academy, books about Owen are being advertised less often by religious publishers and more often by their academic peers. This is an exciting signal that scholars outside the Reformed tradition are paying more attention to one of the most significant English Protestant thinkers. Some purists may not be pleased that Owen is being adapted for new markets. The popularizing and contextual tendencies will always be controversial, but fortunately,

those who promote these various new approaches have less cause than their subject to complain of reviewers who “only filched out of the whole what he thought he could wrest unto his end, and scoffingly descant upon.”¹⁹ Whatever their approach, Owen’s readers have yet to exhaust the significance of his eight million words.

Within these contexts, this book is attempting to do something new. It offers an introduction to Owen’s work but one that is framed around his representation of the spiritual life. Owen was notoriously reluctant to share details of his own life experiences but wrote at great length about his expectations of the lives of others. For Owen, the introduction to spiritual life began in childhood, with baptism and instruction in the faith. He expected that baptized and catechized children would in due course make the profession of faith that would permit them to become members of a local church. Church membership was not a rite of passage but a status conferred only on those who could narrate an experience of conversion, which claim had to be supported by a serious and purposeful lifestyle. In his preaching to young people, Owen presented his high Calvinist theology in sometimes astonishing ways, attempting to inspire his listeners with the almost mystical delights of knowing God in three persons. This style of presentation was made possible by his scholastic theology, but it certainly did not emphasize scholastic method. Owen’s depiction of the challenges of maturity and adulthood recognized the complexity of life at home, in the church, and in society. His contributions to Restoration political theory and to the Scientific Revolution that presaged the Enlightenment show him to be seriously engaged with the cultural challenges affecting Protestant nonconformists. And especially as he grew older, Owen thought a great deal about

19. Owen, *Works*, 2:314.

death. While he lost seven of his ten children during the 1640s and 1650s, his discussion of death, the intermediate state, resurrection, and final glory intensified after the spectacularly horrific executions of those of his friends and colleagues who had high profiles during the Civil Wars and republic and, especially in the 1670s and early 1680s, with the deaths of his first wife, his congregants, his colleagues in ministry, and his last surviving daughter.

Owen's description of spiritual life was developed through one of the most tumultuous centuries in English history. He lived through three monarchies, a civil war, and a republic, and he participated in two invasions. He had to respond as a pastor to the collapse of the Cromwellian regime, the Fire of London, and the Great Plague. And after celebrating the achievements of the republic, as one of its most high-profile religious leaders, he had to work out how Christians should respond to the experience of political defeat and the providential significance of powerlessness, when everything he had worked for had melted into air.

But Owen understood what death meant—and in whom death found meaning. Christians could find death “light” when they remembered “who is the stay of their lives and the end of their death.”²⁰ For Owen, like Paul, to live was Christ and to die was gain (Phil. 1:21). In its continuation and its end, spiritual life was centered on Jesus Christ. Always modest in self-references, Owen regarded himself as having “the least experience” of communion with Christ “of all the saints of God,” but he claimed to have found in that communion “that in it which is better than ten thousand worlds” and sought to spend (speaking of himself in the third person) “the residue of the few and evil days of his pilgrimage in pursuit hereof,—in the con-

20. Owen, *Works*, 2:137.

templations of the excellencies, desirableness, love, and grace of our dear Lord Jesus.”²¹ For Owen understood that the “few and evil days of pilgrimage,” when passed in fellowship with Christ, transformed the “wretched world” in an experience of grace, from birth to death, and far beyond, in a continually deepening spiritual life.²²

21. Owen, *Works*, 2:154.

22. Owen, *Works*, 2:154.

Childhood

John Owen's account of the life of grace began at birth. Owen was an able and sensitive theologian of childhood—and one of the earliest of English children's authors. After several years of parish ministry in Essex during the years of bad harvests and dearth of the later 1640s and the deaths of three of his children under the age of five, Owen became acutely aware of the brevity of childhood and the responsibility of parents and churches to prepare their young people for the present life as well as the life to come. In his published writings and extant sermons, Owen maintained that the children of believers should be baptized and that their Christian formation began with this baptism, but his rationale for this practice and his beliefs about its effect changed considerably over the course of his career, especially in the early 1650s, when he began to work alongside Baptists and accepted that his new friends' understanding of the sacrament and Christian initiation did not represent fundamental theological error.

As his convictions about baptismal practice moderated, and after the deaths of several more of his children in the 1650s,

Owen remained convinced that the children of believers ought to be instructed in the faith and that the child's family and congregation should work together to achieve this end. He addressed this responsibility in two catechisms that he published in 1645, during the period of his parish ministry, and in *The Primer*, which he published in 1652, after taking up his role as a university administrator at Oxford. His catechisms are well known, were reprinted within his lifetime, and follow the familiar model of matching questions and answers to provide instruction on core themes in Christian doctrine. But Owen's *Primer* is much less well known. It is not included in the best-known edition of his work, a set of twenty-four volumes that appeared in the mid-nineteenth century and has (mostly) been kept in print by Banner of Truth, and it has slipped out of sight of the many historians and theologians who continue to study Owen's work. Yet *The Primer* deserves to be recovered. It reveals how this formidable Puritan theologian imagined the ideal Christian home—and illustrates the simplicity and warmth that he thought appropriate for the nurture of Christian children.

It is not clear how Owen's depiction of family life compared to his own experience, either as a parent or a child. He wrote very little about his own childhood, in Stadhampton, Oxfordshire, in the late 1610s and 1620s. He remembered his father, a clergyman within the Church of England, apparently with affection, and he maintained in later life close connections with his brothers and sisters. Stadhampton represented a fixed point in Owen's turning world. When his public career ended with the collapse of the republic, in the early 1660s he returned to live in the village, where his sister was married to the minister of the parish church and was raising the third generation of the family to live in the vicinity. His own experience of fatherhood

was marked by deaths and disappointments and was something that, one early admirer admitted, he had not “much enjoyed.”¹

But the fact that Owen retained his connection with Stadhampton throughout his long life is not to suggest that he had always found the community to be sympathetic to his beliefs. As a schoolboy, Owen recognized that the faith that was encouraged in the family home was ridiculed in the world, hearing “a hundred times” stories about “Brownists and Puritans” that slandered the godly but that, he later discovered, were “forgeries of Pagans . . . imposed on the primitive Christians.”² In response to this criticism, the family home may have sustained a narrative culture of its own. “When a child is abused abroad in the streets by strangers,” Owen recalled, “he runs with speed to the bosom of his father . . . and is comforted.”³ Owen later remembered examples of the “pretty midnight story” that would be “told to bring children asleep.”⁴ The opposition and criticism of the world may have been met in the minister’s house in Stadhampton by the warmth and kindness of bedtime routines.

It is also unclear how Owen’s depiction of family life compared to his experience as a parent. Owen married Mary Rooke in 1643. It would have been a day of extraordinary happiness for the young preacher. Wedding days were occasions of great joy for happy couples, he suggested, “the day of the gladness of their hearts,” later remembering that the “delight of the bridegroom in the day of his espousals is the height of what an expression of delight can be carried unto.”⁵ John and Mary soon became parents. And contrary to the expectations of those historians who imagine that high rates of child mortality in early

1. *A Vindication of the Late Reverend and Learned John Owen D.D.* (London, 1684), 37–38.

2. Owen, *Works*, 8:177, 197.

3. Owen, *Works*, 2:38.

4. Owen, *Works*, 14:153.

5. Owen, *Works*, 2:54, 118.

modernity must have encouraged emotionally distant parenting, Owen may have been an indulgent father. He remembered “how unwilling is a child to come into the presence of an angry father” and thought that if the “correction of a son argues a great provocation,” the correction of an only son must be caused by the “greatest [provocation] imaginable.”⁶ He may well have followed his own advice in building emotional connections between parents and children: “If the love of a father will not make a child delight in him, what will?”⁷

But John and Mary Owen soon experienced tragedy. Their oldest children were born during one of the worst periods of dearth in English history. Owen’s friend, neighbor, and clerical colleague Ralph Josselin recorded in his diary some extraordinary accounts of the cold summers and wet winters in the later 1640s that left cattle starving in the fields and children dying of disease. Owen referred to the excessive rain and short harvests of these years in a sermon in January 1649.⁸ The environmental tragedy was touching his own home too: the firstborn, John, who was born in 1644, witnessed the deaths of his sisters, Mary and Elizah (d. 1647), and brother, Thomas (d. 1648), before his own death in 1649. Owen never described the impact of these deaths on Mary or the pain and terrible emptiness of their suddenly childless home.

Nevertheless, it was during this difficult period that Owen’s thoughts turned to the instruction of children and to their formation in Christian faith. Owen’s thoughts about child-rearing were often quite practical—as when, for example, he warned against giving children too much money.⁹ But his principal concern was for the spiritual welfare of children in Christian homes. He recognized that the warm affection that he encour-

6. Owen, *Works*, 2:35, 96.

7. Owen, *Works*, 2:36.

8. Owen, *Works*, 8:151.

9. Owen, *Works*, 8:81.

aged in Christian families could never ensure the salvation of their children: “We cannot love grace into a child. . . . We cannot love them into heaven, though it may be the great desire of our soul. It was love that made Abraham cry, ‘O that Ishmael might live before thee!’ but it might not be.”¹⁰ And so Owen’s earliest writing illustrated the importance he placed on the baptism and spiritual nurture of the children of Christian parents. His catechisms provided a simple, precise, and well-rounded introduction to Christian teaching. While these publications were addressed to adults, a short pamphlet that he published provided its intended audience of “young learners” with basic skills in literacy and numeracy while teaching the elements of Reformed Christianity and encouraging family routines that emphasized gratitude and prayer.

This chapter considers Owen’s account of Christian childhood, from the initiation represented in baptism, through its formation within the home, to its preparation for full communion with the church by means of catechism. For Owen, the grace that sustained spiritual life began in a distinctively Christian childhood.

Baptism

Like other Reformed theologians, Owen thought a great deal about the sacraments. In the early decades of the Reformation, Reformed theologians came to agree that the true church could be distinguished from the false church by its proper administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. This claim, which recognized the proper administration of the sacraments as one of the three “marks” of the church, reflected the Protestant emphasis on the simplification of sacramental theology, by means of which the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church were

10. Owen, *Works*, 2:63.

reduced in their number and, in many but not all cases, their effect. Debates about the sacraments defined the parties that were contesting the direction of Protestant reform. Reformed theologians had to articulate their theology of baptism against the claims of Catholics on one side and Anabaptists on the other. Their struggle was to maintain a biblical middle way. After all, they considered, if Catholics claimed too much for the power of baptism, Anabaptists reduced it to being no more than a sign. If Catholics wished to provide baptism to every child born under their jurisdiction, Anabaptists wished to restrict it to those who could believe. If Catholics aligned baptism with entry into the body politic, Anabaptists limited it to entry into the church. Owen developed his theology of baptism in reaction to these competing claims but also in response to the changing political circumstances of the mid-seventeenth century, the rise and fall of the Presbyterian party during the English Civil Wars, and his ongoing reading of Scripture. He thought it possible that children could be born again “before they come to the use of reason, or in their infancy.”¹¹ But he did not link baptism to this experience of saving grace. His rationale for the practice of infant baptism certainly evolved, but Owen consistently argued that it marked the child’s entry into the care of the local congregation, if not into its actual membership, and that baptism in that sense marked the beginning of Christian nurture.

Owen “wrote little about baptism,” although he thought about the sacrament throughout his career.¹² He inherited a high view of baptism from the English Reformers. In his earliest reference to baptism, in a book published in 1643, Owen argued that baptism does something: it takes away “that which hinders

11. Owen, *Works*, 3:213.

12. Ryan M. McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory: Trinitarian Piety, Public Worship and a Reassessment of John Owen’s Theology* (Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 111.

our salvation; which is not the first sin of Adam imputed, but our own inherent lust and pollution.”¹³ This was an unusual position for a Puritan minister to adopt, echoing as it did the *ex opere operato* model of the medieval and Catholic church, in which the benefits of baptism were automatically conferred on the infant in the administration of the rite—although Catholic theologians taught that baptism removed the stain of original sin, rather than actual transgressions. But Owen was not alone in making these kinds of claims. One of the most important members of the Westminster Assembly, Cornelius Burgess, had made similar arguments in a book published in Oxford around the same time that Owen began his undergraduate studies in that city.¹⁴ For Burgess, the idea that baptism was in some way related to the regeneration of elect infants was well within the orthodox boundaries of English Reformed thought. It seems likely that Owen shared a version of this position in arguing that baptism removes “our own inherent lust and pollution.” But he quickly revised this claim.

Owen began to moderate his high view of the efficacy of baptism. In his first catechism, in 1645, he moved away from this argument about inherent sin to argue instead that baptism effected the adoption of the baptized child, by bringing the child into God’s family. Baptism, he instructed his parishioners, is “an holy Ordinance, whereby being sprinkled with water according to Christ’s institution, we are by his grace made children of God, and have the promises of the Covenant sealed unto us.”¹⁵ Owen’s later writing did not enlarge on this idea, perhaps because the Westminster Assembly, then meeting to define the

13. Owen, *Works*, 10:80.

14. Cornelius Burgess, *Baptismall Regeneration of Elect Infants Professed by the Church of England, according to the Scriptures, the Primitive Church, the Present Reformed Churches, and Many Particular Divines Apart* (Oxford, 1629); cf. Thomas Crosfield, *The Diary of Thomas Crosfield*, ed. F. S. Boas (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 38.

15. Owen, *Works*, 1:469.

orthodoxy of the established churches of England, was coming to a different conclusion, arguing against the view that baptism achieved something by insisting that baptisms should be carried out because of a preexisting reality. The liturgical handbook that the Westminster Assembly published argued that the children of believers should be baptized because they were already “Christians, and federally holy before Baptisme,” and not, as Owen had insisted, made children of God by that sacramental action.¹⁶ This was a slight but significant revision.

Owen continued to think through the doctrine, learning from the Westminster Assembly’s Confession, if not its Directory for Public Worship, as he did so. By 1652, he had adopted the position that he would maintain for the rest of his writing career, defining baptism as “an holy institution of Jesus Christ, wherein the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is a sign and seal of my washing with the Blood and Spirit of Christ, of my ingrafting into him, and pardon of sin thereby.”¹⁷ Adding the Trinitarian formula, and drawing on the Augustinian language of sign and seal, Owen had arrived at a definition of baptism that was solidly biblical and would become widely accepted, even among those who differed from Owen on the question of its proper subjects.

And so, in the early 1650s, as the Westminster divines completed the work of the assembly, Owen continued to moderate the high view of baptism that his earliest publications had assumed. Perhaps significantly, this move seems to have occurred as he began to spend a significant amount of time working alongside other Puritans who argued that baptism should be restricted to those who could make a credible profession of faith. From 1652, Owen worked with prominent Baptists on a

16. [Westminster Assembly,] *A Directory for the Publique Worship of God throughout the Three Kingdomes* (London, 1645), 20.

17. John Owen, *The Primer* (London, 1652), n.p.

series of high-profile committees that were tasked with guiding the religious policy of the new republic, overseeing the accuracy of printed Bibles, managing a project for a new translation of Scripture (which never materialized), and monitoring appointments to the list of preachers whose salaries were provided by the state. Owen's expectations of the effects of baptism moderated as this work continued. In 1652, as we have just noticed, he abandoned his earlier speculations about the achievements of baptism to emphasize instead its significance as sign and seal. In 1654, he was arguing against the doctrine of baptismal regeneration.¹⁸ In 1656, he described baptism as assisting in sanctification by acting as a visible reminder of the believer's status: "We have in baptism an evidence of our implantation into Christ; we are baptized into him" in "his death." Our being "baptized into the death of Christ" represents the mortification of our corruptions, with our total "conformity" to the experience of Christ, "so that as he was raised up to glory, we may be raised up to grace and newness of life."¹⁹

These arguments confirmed his position that baptism was a sign and seal, but he was also willing to tolerate others with different beliefs. Through much of the 1650s, he sat on committees that were tasked with constructing a statement of faith to establish the boundaries of belief for the Cromwellian national church. The most detailed document that this committee prepared, "A New Confession of Faith," which was privately circulated in 1654, made no mention at all of the sacraments. By the mid-1650s, as his own views on sacramental efficacy were moderating, Owen had conceded that the denial of infant baptism did not represent fundamental theological error.

18. Owen, *Works*, 11:552.

19. Owen, *Works*, 6:84.

Owen could downplay the significance of the rejection of infant baptism because he was rethinking the role of baptism in the Christian life. He came to distinguish baptism not just from the application of salvation but also from the experience of joining a church. In 1657, he argued that baptism “precedes admission into church membership, as to a particular church; the subjects of it . . . have right unto it, whether they be joined to any particular church or no” (his insistence that “this judgment hath been my constant and uninterrupted practice,” like his other claims to consistency, should not be taken at face value).²⁰ And as he extrapolated the sacrament from its traditional role as providing entrance to church membership, he also concluded that those who rejected the doctrine of infant baptism and who subjected themselves to what might be considered a second baptism should not be considered schismatic. Of course, there were some very unfortunate historical precedents for the practice of rebaptism, he recognized, but seventeenth-century Baptists were not Donatists. Baptists “do the same thing” as Donatists, he recognized, “but not on the same principles.” He understood the logic of his Baptist colleagues to be that infant baptism is “null from the nature of the thing itself, not the way of its administration,” and so concluded that his Baptist friends, unlike the Donatists, were not claiming that they were the only true church, a claim that would properly have been considered schismatic.²¹

Owen’s thinking through the doctrine of baptism and his conclusion that it provided neither salvation nor the status of church membership worked to the advantage of his new colleagues, who, he recognized, were denying their children an ordinance that, whatever its symbolic value, had no intrinsic

20. Owen, *Works*, 13:259.

21. Owen, *Works*, 13:184.

effect. Owen's about-face on baptism was lowering the stakes in one of the most significant theological debates of the seventeenth century. Recognizing that he had more in common with Baptists than with the Presbyterians with whom he had once been aligned, Owen enabled the theological détente that was being sustained in the cooperative efforts that underlay the search for a Cromwellian religious settlement.

For all this moderating of his views, however, Owen was still active among the Congregational churches. In autumn 1658, just weeks after the death of Oliver Cromwell, Owen met with other Congregational leaders to prepare a revision of the Westminster Confession that they could own as a statement of denominational faith. The Savoy Declaration, which they produced, restated the baptismal formulae of the Westminster divines; it did not allow the flexibility for baptism that Owen's more recent writing had explored, but it did confirm his emphasis on baptism as sign and seal.

After 1660, as the changing political circumstances of the Restoration of the monarchy initiated a brutal persecution, pushing dissenters together as a suffering community, Owen's thoughts turned again to the question of what baptism meant. In 1662, he recognized that the baptismal texts he had formerly read in realist terms should be understood metaphorically. He remembered that the early church required candidates to prepare for baptism through a scrupulous program of catechesis.²² As a consequence, the apostles and the fathers who succeeded them regarded "all baptized, initiated persons, ingrafted into the church, as sanctified persons."²³ Owen made this claim while also defending the proposition, in *A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God* (1667), that the

22. Owen, *Works*, 15:23.

23. Owen, *Works*, 10:367.

“proper subjects of baptism” are “professing believers . . . and their infant seed,” who, he reminded his readers, were not made members of the church by baptism.²⁴ The children of believers may not be church members, he recognized, but they were already “holy” (1 Cor. 7:14).

It was during this period that Owen published one of his longest and most considered discussions of baptism. In his exposition of Psalm 130 (1668), he emphasized that baptism was a sign, which represents the “certainty and truth of [God’s] grace in pardon unto their senses by a visible pledge. [God] lets them know that he would take away their sin, wherein their spiritual defilement doth consist, even as water takes away the outward filth of the body.”²⁵ Critically, Owen refused to “dispute . . . who are the proper immediate objects of [baptism]; whether they only who actually can make profession of their faith, or believers with their infant seed. For my part,” he continued, “I believe that all whom Christ loves and pardons are to be made partakers of the pledge thereof.”²⁶

This was a very ambiguous defense of infant baptism, but it emphasized Owen’s conviction that baptism stopped short of introducing its subject into church membership. For that to happen, Owen considered, in a posthumous publication, baptism should be followed by a period of appropriate spiritual nurture, “until they come unto such seasons wherein the personal performance of those duties whereon the continuation of the estate of visible regeneration doth depend is required of them.”²⁷ At some point following childhood, those who had been baptized and instructed in the faith were to profess that faith and in so doing join the membership of a congregation.

24. Owen, *Works*, 15:512.

25. Owen, *Works*, 6:465–66.

26. Owen, *Works*, 6:466.

27. Owen, *Works*, 16:12.

Of course, he argued, some children of Christian families would not choose to do so: “Herein if they fail, they lose all privilege and benefit by their baptism.”²⁸ For the blessings of baptism were conditional and time bound. Baptism was a sign of the “holy” status of the children of believers and could act as a “seal” of the faith that they professed. But for those who never professed faith, their baptism meant nothing.

Throughout his mature writing, Owen emphasized the blessings that were signaled but not achieved by baptism. Although he employed several theologies of baptism to support a single baptismal practice, he consistently regarded baptism as the beginning of Christian formation. Along with the preaching of the gospel, it was a means by which children born into Christian families would own their status as Christian disciples.²⁹ While baptism did not effect regeneration or inclusion within the church, and while, as a consequence, those who did not baptize their children were not guilty of schism or fundamental theological error, Owen still insisted that baptism was the “beginning and foundation of . . . all the other spiritual privileges.”³⁰ It was the sign and seal of a distinctively Christian childhood—and signified the beginning of spiritual life.

Formation

Whatever his changing views on baptism and its effects, Owen understood that a child born into a Christian family had to be instructed in faith. In 1652, while undertaking senior administrative roles at the University of Oxford, Owen published *The Primer*, a small pamphlet, like others of a similar name, that sought to provide a basic educational resource for Christian children. This short work was designed to teach “young

28. Owen, *Works*, 16:12.

29. Owen, *Works*, 15:144.

30. Owen, *Works*, 7:18.

learners” how to read and how to recognize roman and arabic numbers, while also providing texts for memorization, including several psalms, chapters from the Gospels, the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, and a basic catechism, which was focused on God’s actions in creating the cosmos, in giving the law in the Ten Commandments, and in providing those who could not keep that law with a way of salvation. *The Primer* included prayers that were to be used before and after eating, as well as a morning prayer and two prayers for the evening (these prayers are reprinted in the appendix of this book).

The Primer is an extraordinary document. It affords a glimpse into the ideal Christian household as Owen imagined it. This ideal family would spend considerable time educating their children, but it would also structure its daily routine around worship. Its members would pray individually in the morning and evening, as well as before and after every meal. Owen did not expect these prayers to be long. Family members would be well instructed in the faith, and parents would be able to teach their children. These children would memorize entire chapters of Scripture and be able to draw on the riches of Christian antiquity, while understanding key concepts from the Calvinist Reformation. One of the most striking features of *The Primer* is its provision of set prayers. After all, Owen wrote at length in other publications against the use of set prayers, especially in the liturgy of the established church, and he always defended his claim that in public worship all addresses to God should be extemporaneous.³¹ In providing children with set forms for daily prayer, Owen was recognizing the difference between private and public worship, as well as the difference between what might be expected of adult worshipers and what might be expected of children who were learning the Christian faith.

31. See, for example, his *Discourse concerning Liturgies* (1662).

The question was particularly acute in relation to the Lord's Prayer, for in encouraging children to use this traditional liturgical form, Owen was allowing children a spiritual routine that he would deny to their believing parents. In a later publication, Owen was clear that the Lord's Prayer was not appropriate for use in public worship, but it did provide a model for use in private worship.³² His criticism of this liturgical tradition reflected his aspiration that public worship should be guided by the Holy Spirit. The guidance of the Spirit was still claimed by ministers within the Church of England, some of whom were breaking the law by continuing to use the recently proscribed Book of Common Prayer, and by ministers within the community of Presbyterians, who used as a liturgical form the Westminster Assembly's Directory for Public Worship. Yet Owen understood that extemporaneous worship would be facilitated by the Spirit. He argued that Jesus had provided his disciples with a formula for prayer to guide them in the period of time before his gift of the Spirit made such formulae redundant:

Our Saviour at that time was minister of the circumcision, and taught the doctrine of the gospel under and with the observation of all the worship of the Judaical church. He was not yet glorified, and so the Spirit was not as yet given; I mean that Spirit which He promised unto His disciples to enable them to perform all the worship of God by Him required at their hands, whereof we have before spoken. That, then, which the Lord Jesus prescribed unto His disciples for their present practice in the worship of God, seems to have belonged unto the economy of the Old Testament. Now, to argue from the prescription of, and outward helps for, the performance of the worship of God under the Old Testament, unto a necessity of the like or the same under the

32. Owen, *Works*, 15:15.

New, is upon the matter to deny that Christ is ascended on high, and to have given spiritual gifts unto men eminently distinct from and above those given out by Him under the Judaical pedagogy.³³

The Lord's Prayer, then, was suitable for Jewish believers before the giving of the Spirit and for the use of children in Christian families before their experience of saving grace and the consequent filling of the Spirit allowed for the possibility of extemporaneous worship.³⁴

Owen's encouragement for children to use the Lord's Prayer threw up other anomalies. After all, he was encouraging children who had been baptized but who had not yet been incorporated into the church after a credible profession of faith to approach God as their Father. He made this position explicit in the morning and evening prayers. "A prayer for the morning" began by addressing the "Blessed Lord God, the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ: and in him my God, and my Father," but it continued, with some uncertainty, to have the child pray that she might yet be made "accepted in thy beloved Son." Similarly, in one of the evening prayers, the supplicant requested, "Stretch out thy Fatherly armes unto my soule, to receive it with mercy into thy bosom [of] love," while the other appealed to "my dear Father in Jesus Christ."³⁵ Like his new friends among the Baptists, Owen was arguing that children should be regarded as being outside the boundaries of the church and the pale of salvation, but like his Congregational and Presbyterian colleagues, he insisted that they should still be able to address God as their Father.

33. Owen, *Works*, 15:14.

34. For a discussion of the relevance of Owen's views of the Lord's Prayer, see William Kelly, "Appendix to the Notice of the *Achill Herald* Recollections," *The Bible Treasury* 140 (1868): 15.

35. Owen, *The Primer*, n.p.

Owen faced up to the paradox, explaining that children using *The Primer* should be able to approach God as Father while simultaneously praying for their own salvation. He explained that “we come to have part and fellowship with Christ in the work of our redemption” by means of the “power of his Word and Spirit,” through which we are “brought unto union with [Jesus Christ], and a participation of all the benefits by him purchased for us.” Children should expect the Spirit to “quicken” them and to “beget” faith within them, which Owen described as a “grace of the Spirit” by which we “receive Jesus Christ for righteousness and salvation.” Owen explained that the Spirit bestowed faith “in the preaching of the Word, confirming and increasing it, by the administration of the Sacraments.” *The Primer* concluded with a review of the “chief benefits of the death of Christ,” with definitions of *justification*, *adoption*, and *sanctification* slightly adapted from those of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which were followed by the text of the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed.³⁶

The brevity of this catechism is striking. Owen did not expect his “young learners” to grapple with complex or especially controversial theological ideas. *The Primer* attempted to simplify and abbreviate the content of the Shorter Catechism that had been prepared by the Westminster divines. Neither were the children of Christian families expected to understand much beyond the conviction that Scripture is the repository of “all truth concerning God, and our selves”; God as Trinity and Creator; the fall, the transmission of the original sin, and the sinner’s “disability . . . to [do] any thing that is spiritually good”; the Ten Commandments as a record of the ways in which sinners fall short of God’s glory; and God’s provision of a way of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

36. Owen, *The Primer*, n.p.

For all Owen's reputation as a champion of high Calvinism, the catechism he prepared for children made no mention of the divine decrees of election and reprobation or the extent or effect of the atonement. *The Primer* was focused on teaching children the central themes of the evangelical preaching that dominated mid-seventeenth-century England. The "young learners" using this book would know how to read and count and would understand basic ideas about God as Trinity, the creation of humanity, the fall, and redemption through Jesus Christ. They would be taught to pray, committing their days to their heavenly Father and thanking him for their food, and they would come to understand God's care of creation through learning Psalm 104, the incarnation through learning Matthew 2, and the atonement through learning John 18–19. The "young learners" who were taught from *The Primer* would understand the need for faith, while knowing that God was their Father.³⁷

And the set prayers, too, were short. Owen did not have unrealistic expectations of the children whose faith he sought to nurture. They were infants, he might have considered, and their Christian formation had to pay attention to the limits of their comprehension and their attention span. But this was a signal of his high, not low, expectations of their potential. For growing up in a home suffused with prayer, a home that recognized God's blessing in everyday providences, and a home that returned thanks for it, the children who learned about their faith were in reality learning about their family and its world. The religious instruction of children was too important to be allocated only special time in a weekly routine. It had to happen everywhere, all the time, daily, hourly, individually at the close and break of day, and every time the family ate. The parents' piety and their hopes for their children created an atmosphere

37. Owen, *The Primer*, n.p.

in the home that their religious instruction explained and that the life of the church confirmed. And church services were to be organized to take account of the attention span of the little ones, as he elsewhere observed: “Better a great number should complain of the shortness of some duties . . . than that a few who are sincere should be really discouraged by being overburdened, and have the service thereby made useless to them.”³⁸ Owen’s sense of the spiritual formation of children recognized the centrality of the family unit, even as it acknowledged that spiritual formation took a village—or at least, a village church.

Catechism

The Primer represented a simplification of the catechisms that Owen had prepared during his years of parish ministry in Essex villages. The material contained in *The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ, Unfolded in Two Short Catechisms* (1645) was supplementary to Owen’s public ministry, and he excused his brief treatment of the sacraments because, he said, “I have already been so frequent in examinations about them.”³⁹ He likewise recognized that he had “wholly omitted” any discussion of “moral duties,” hoping at some later date to provide an exposition of the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles’ Creed, an aspiration that he partially fulfilled in *The Primer*.⁴⁰

The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ contained a “lesser catechism” that was to be learned by the “younger sort,” which he expected to be taught in families.⁴¹ While this catechism contained only thirty-three questions, it covered significant

38. Owen, *Works*, 19:458.

39. Owen, *Works*, 1:466.

40. Owen, *Works*, 1:466. William Goold, Owen’s nineteenth-century editor, does not appear to have been aware of *The Primer* and believed that Owen never fulfilled this aspiration. Owen, *Works*, 1:464.

41. Owen, *Works*, 1:465.

doctrinal range and assumed that those who learned its contents had savingly benefited from its doctrine. After all, as we have just noted, in his early years of ministry Owen maintained a very high view of baptism. His “lesser catechism” described the “holy ordinance” as the sprinkling with water, “according to Christ’s institution,” whereby “we are by his grace made children of God, and have the promises of the covenants sealed unto us.”⁴² And so, beginning with the statement that “all truth concerning God and ourselves” is to be learned from Scripture, the catechism went on to consider the essence of God; his Trinitarian being; his decrees of election and reprobation; his works in creation and providence; the fall of our first parents; our deliverance through Jesus Christ; Christ’s offices as prophet, priest, and king; Christ’s humiliation and exaltation; and the claim that Christ performed his offices “only for his elect.” The catechism described the “universal company of God’s elect” as the church and recognized that members were added to the church “by a lively faith,” an “assured resting of the soul upon God’s promises of mercy in Jesus Christ, for pardon of sins here and glory hereafter.” This faith is not the basis for our being accounted righteous, which comes “only for the righteousness of Christ, freely imputed unto us, and laid hold of by faith.”⁴³ The Christian life requires “universal obedience to the will of God revealed unto us” and brings privileges, including union with Christ; our adoption into God’s family; the fellowship that we share with other believers; a right to the seals of the new covenant, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper; Christian liberty; and the hope of resurrection.⁴⁴

As this shorter catechism demonstrated, Owen had high expectations of the “younger sort” and of the families that would

42. Owen, *Works*, 1:469.

43. Owen, *Works*, 1:468.

44. Owen, *Works*, 1:467–70.

teach them. The “greater catechism” offered a substantial exposition of the shorter text by turning almost every one of its questions into a “chapter” of questions in which the abstract designed for children could be more systematically explained. This longer catechism was prepared for those who would be instructing their families in the faith, and Owen insisted that those who used his work should take responsibility to test his theological statements against the biblical citations that he provided.

Owen prepared his “greater catechism” with a broader purpose. In 1645, the year of its publication, Parliament had passed an ordinance that radically restricted admission to the Lord’s Supper. For centuries, the residents of England’s eleven thousand parishes had been admitted to the Eucharist simply on the grounds of their location. This situation changed during the First English Civil War (1642–1646), when the party of Presbyterians then in the ascendant pushed for a tightening of expectations about the beliefs and behavior of those who should be admitted to the Table. The Presbyterians were reflecting widespread concerns that the English Reformation had been ineffective in its program of confessionalization. And so the ordinance required ministers to examine congregants regarding their faith and practice and to permit to the Lord’s Supper only those who could demonstrate a credible profession of faith and a reasonable proficiency in Christian knowledge. Owen’s “greater catechism” was one of a number of catechetical works to be published in 1645 to address this need. It was a handbook for pastoral practice, and it offered guidelines for the minimum level of doctrinal knowledge required of those who should be admitted into the church.

This catechism indicated what Owen believed could be achieved by the coordinated efforts of the family and the local

church. He wanted his doctrinal preaching to be reinforced by doctrinal instruction in the home, as children worked from the “lesser catechism” to capture the more detailed account of the faith in the longer text. And the effect of this formal course of doctrinal instruction would be that Christian families could do more with the preaching they heard each Sunday. As the content of that preaching became easier to assimilate, so its potential increased as a means of grace. Doctrinal teaching in the home and in the church created a virtuous circle that energized growth in grace, which would be further enabled by admission into the fellowship of the church and to its means of grace, especially the Lord’s Supper. Catechesis enabled entry to church fellowship, and it nurtured spiritual life.

Conclusion

Owen’s account of Christian nurture pulled together the roles of the family and the church. He was convinced that children growing up in Christian homes and churches should be encouraged to believe that God was their Father. Owen expected Christian families to reinforce the teaching of the church by instructing their children in the three classical forms—the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles’ Creed—as well as in the catechisms that he provided in the 1640s as a parish minister and in the 1650s as a public theologian with a day job in university administration. Owen’s publications allowed for children to be gradually formed in their understanding of their Christian heritage. *The Primer* offers a glimpse into the simplicity he expected of childhood piety within the home, as well as the daily routines of thankfulness that he expected parents to exemplify. *The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ* offered a more technically demanding “lesser catechism” and a much more substantial “greater catechism,” which must have

challenged his parishioners in its detail and extent but which was designed to prepare them for life within the church. Taken together, these publications suggest how Owen hoped that those who consumed the “pure milk of the word” in childhood could be nurtured into capable theologians in adolescence and in preparation for admission into the congregation. It was the hope of one of the earliest of English children’s writers that the “newborn babes” who “desire the sincere milk of the word” would so “grow thereby” (1 Pet. 2:2) as to be “no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine,” but to be those who, “speaking the truth in love,” would “grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:14–15), and would thus experience the grace that enables spiritual life.

More than three centuries after his death, Puritan theologian John Owen continues to have an impact on readers. In his eight million published words, he addressed a wide range of topics, from theological and biblical commentary to social and political issues. In this survey of Owen's life and work, Crawford Gribben captures the vision of the Christian life that Owen himself lived out—and hoped his readers would live out as well.



“In this fresh approach to the core intellectual ideas of John Owen, Crawford Gribben has written what amounts to a must-read work about the *mentalité* of this theological colossus. A fabulous achievement!”

MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN, Chair and Professor of Church History,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This book is a helpful introduction to one of the greatest theologians our world has known and a healthy enticement to feed on Owen's writings for a lifetime.”

JOEL R. BEEKE, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; author,
Reformed Preaching; coauthor, *Reformed Systematic Theology*



CRAWFORD GRIBBEN (PhD, University of Strathclyde) is professor of early modern British history at Queen's University Belfast and previously served as associate professor of early modern print culture at Trinity College Dublin. Gribben is also the author of the groundbreaking biography *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat*.