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Biography of John Owen

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Biography of John Owen

Owen, John (1616–1683), theologian, was born of Puritan parents at Stadham in Oxfordshire in 1616. At twelve years of age he was admitted at Queen's College, Oxford, where he took his B.A. degree in 1632 and M.A. in 1635. During these years he worked with such diligence that he allowed himself but four hours sleep a night, and damaged his health by this excessive labour. In 1637 he was driven from Oxford by his refusal to comply with the requirements of Laud's new statutes. Having taken orders shortly before, he became chaplain and tutor in the family of Sir Robert Dormer of Ascot in Oxfordshire. At the outbreak of the civil troubles he adopted Parliamentary principles, and thus lost both his place and the prospects of succeeding to his uncle's fortune. For a while he lived in Charterhouse Yard, in great unsettlement of mind on religious questions, which was removed at length by a sermon which he accidentally heard at St Michael's in Wood Street.

His first publication, in 1642, *A Display of Arminianism*, dedicated to the committee of religion gained him the living of Fordham in Essex, from which a "scandalous minister" had been ejected. Here he was married, and by his marriage he had eleven children.

Although he was thus formally united to Presbyterianism, Owen's views were originally inclined to those of the Independents, and, as he acquainted himself more fully with the controversy, he became more resolved in that direction. He represented, in fact, that large class of persons who, falling away from Episcopacy, attached themselves to the very moderate form of Presbyterianism which obtained in England as being that which came first in their way. His views at this time are shown by his *Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished*. At Fordham he remained until 1646, when, the old incumbent dying, the presentation lapsed to the patron, who gave it to some one else. He was now, however, coming into notice, for on April 29 he preached before the Parliament. In this sermon, and still more in his *Thoughts on Church Government*, which he appended to it, his tendency to break away from Presbyterianism is displayed.

The people of Coggeshall in Essex now invited him to become their pastor. Here he declared his change by founding a church on Congregational principles, and, in 1647, by publishing *Eshcol*, as well as various works against Arminianism. He made the friendship of Fairfax while the latter was besieging Colchester, and urgently addressed the army there against religious persecution. He was chosen to preach to Parliament on the day after the execution of Charles, and succeeded in fulfilling his task without mentioning that event, and again on April 19, when he spake thus:—"The time shall come when the earth shall disclose her slain, and not the simplest heretic shall have his blood unrevenged; neither shall any atonement or expiation be allowed for this blood, while a toe of the image, or a bone of the beast, is left unbroken."

He now became acquainted with Cromwell, who carried him off to Ireland in 1649 as his chaplain, that he might regulate the affairs of Trinity College; while there he began the first of his frequent controversies with Baxter by writing against the latter's *Aphorisms of Justification*. In 1650 he accompanied Cromwell to Scotland, and returned to Coggeshall in 1651. In March Cromwell, as chancellor, gave him the deanery of Christ Church, and made him vice-chancellor in September 1652. In 1651, October 24, after Worcester, he preached the thanksgiving sermon before Parliament. In October 1653 he was one of several ministers whom Cromwell, probably to sound their views, summoned to a consultation as to church union. In December in the same year he had the honour of D.D. conferred upon him by his university. In the Parliament of 1664 he sat, but only for a short time, as member for Oxford university, and, with Baxter, was placed on the committee for settling the "fundamentals" necessary for the toleration promised in the Instrument of Government. He was, too, one of the Triers, and appears to have behaved with kindness and moderation in that capacity. As vice-chancellor he acted with readiness and spirit when a general rising in the west seemed imminent in 1655; his adherence to Cromwell, however was by no means slavish, for he drew up, at the request of Desborough and Pride, a petition against his receiving the kingship (see Ludlow's *Memoirs*, ed. 1751, p. 224). During the years 1654–58 his chief controversial works were *De Divina Justitia*, *The Perseverance of Saints* (against Goodwin) and *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ* (against the Socinians). In 1658 he took a leading part in the conference which drew up the Savoy Declaration.

Baxter declares that at the death of Cromwell Owen joined the Wallingford House party. This, though supported by the fact that under the Restoration he had among his congregation a large number of these officers, Owen himself utterly denied. He appears, however, to have assisted in the restoration of the Rump Parliament, and, when Monk began his march into England, Owen, in the name of the Independent churches, to whom Monk was supposed to belong, and who were keenly anxious as to his intentions, wrote to dissuade him from the enterprise.

In March 1660, the Presbyterian party being uppermost, Owen was deprived of his deanery, which was given back to Reynolds. He retired to Stadham, where he wrote various controversial and theological works, in especial the laborious *Theologoumena Pantodapa*, a history of the rise and progress of theology. In 1661 was published the celebrated *Fiat Lux*, a work in which the oneness and beauty of Roman Catholicism are contrasted with the confusion and multiplicity of Protestant sects. At Clarendon's request Owen answered this in 1662 in his *Animadversions*; and this led of course to a prolonged controversy. Clarendon now offered Owen preferment if he would conform. Owen's condition for making terms was liberty to all who agree in doctrine with the Church of England; nothing therefore came of the negotiation.

In 1663 he was invited by the Congregational churches in Boston, New England, to become their minister, but declined. The Conventicle and Five Mile Acts soon drove him to London; and in 1666, after the Fire, he, as did other leading Nonconformist ministers, fitted up a room for public service and gathered a congregation, composed chiefly of the old Commonwealth officers. Meanwhile he was incessantly writing; and in 1667 he published his *Catechism*, which led to a proposal from Baxter for union. Various papers passed, and after a year the attempt was closed by the following laconical note from Owen: "I am still a well-wisher to these mathematics." It was now, too, that he published the first part of his vast work upon the Epistle to the Hebrews.

In 1669 Owen wrote a spirited remonstrance to the Congregationalists in New England, who, under the influence of Presbyterianism, had shown themselves persecutors. At home, too, he was busy in the same cause. In 1670 Parker attacked the Nonconformists in his own style of clumsy intolerance. Owen answered him; Parker repeated his attack; Marvell wrote *The Rehearsal Transposed*; and Parker is remembered by this alone.

At the revival of the Conventicle Acts in 1670, Owen was appointed to draw up a paper of reasons which was submitted to the House of Lords in protest. In this or the following year Harvard university invited him to become their president; he received similar invitations from some of the Dutch universities.

When Charles issued his Declaration of Indulgence in 1672, Owen drew up an address of thanks. This indulgence gave the dissenters an opportunity for increasing their churches and services, and Owen was one of the first preachers at the weekly lectures which the Independents and Presbyterians jointly held in Plummer's Hall. He was held in high respect by a large number of the nobility (one of the many things which point to the fact that Congregationalism was by no means the creed of the poor and insignificant), and during 1674 both Charles and James held prolonged conversations with him in which they assured him of their good wishes to the dissenters. Charles gave him 1000 guineas to relieve those upon whom the severe laws had chiefly pressed. In 1674 Owen was attacked by one Dr Sherlock, whom he easily vanquished, and from this time until 1680 he was engaged upon his ministry and the writing of religious works. In 1680, however, Stillingfleet having on May 11 preached his sermon on "The Mischief of Separation," Owen defended the Nonconformists from the charge of schism in his *Brief Vindication*. Baxter and Howe also answered Stillingfleet, who replied in *The Unreasonableness of Separation*. Owen again answered this, and then left the controversy to a swarm of eager combatants. From this time to his death he was occupied with continual writing, disturbed only by an absurd charge of being concerned in the Rye House Plot. His most important work was his *Treatise on Evangelical Churches* in which were contained his latest views regarding church government. During his life he issued more than eighty separate publications, many of them of great size. Of these a list may be found in Orme's *Memoirs of Owen*. For some years before his death Owen had suffered greatly

from stone and asthma. He died quietly, though after great pain, at Ealing, on August 24, 1683, and was buried on September 4th in Bunhill Fields, being followed to the grave by a large procession of persons of distinction. "In younger age a most comely and majestic form; but in the latter stages of life, depressed by constant infirmities, emaciated with frequent diseases, and above all crushed under the weight of intense and unremitting studies, it became an incommensurable mansion for the vigorous exertions of the spirit in the service of its God."

For engraved portraits of Owen see first edition of Palmer's *Nonconformists' Memorial* and Vertue's *Sermons and Tracts*, 1721. The chief authorities for the life are Owen's *Works*; Orme's *Memoirs of Owen*; Wood's *Athenæ Oxonienses*; Baxter's *Life*; Neal's *History of the Puritans*; Edward's *Gangræna*; and the various histories of the Independents.

Biography of John Owen

John Owen (1616–August 24, 1683) was an English Nonconformist church leader.

Of Welsh descent, he was born at Stadham in Oxfordshire, and was educated at Queen's College, Oxford (B.A. 1632, M.A. 1635); at the time the college was noted, according to Thomas Fuller, for its metaphysicians. A Puritan by upbringing, in 1637 Owen was driven from Oxford by Laud's new statutes, and became chaplain and tutor in the family of Sir Robert Dormer and then in that of Lord Lovelace. At the outbreak of the English Civil War he sided with the parliament, and thus lost both his place and the prospects of succeeding to his Welsh Royalist uncle's fortune. For a while he lived in Charterhouse Yard, troubled by religious questions. His doubts were removed by a sermon preached by a stranger in Aldermanbury Chapel where he had gone intending to hear Edmund Calamy the Elder. His first publication, *A Display of Arminianism* (1642), was a spirited defence of rigid Calvinism. It was dedicated to the committee of religion, and gained him the living of Fordham in Essex, from which a "scandalous minister" had been ejected. At Fordham he remained engrossed in the work of his parish and writing only *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* until 1646, when, the old incumbent dying, the presentation lapsed to the patron, who gave it to some one else.

He was now, however, becoming known. On April 29, he preached before the Long Parliament. In this sermon, and even more in his *Country Essay for the Practice of Church Government*, which he appended to it, his tendency to break away from Presbyterianism to the more tolerant Independent or Congregational system is plainly seen. Like John Milton, he saw little to choose between "new presbyter" and "old priest," and disliked a rigid and arbitrary polity by whatever name it was called. He became pastor at Coggeshall in Essex, where a large influx of Flemish tradesmen provided a congenial Independent atmosphere. His adoption of Congregational principles did not affect his theological position, and in 1647 he again attacked the Arminians in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, which drew him into long debate with Richard Baxter. He made the friendship of Fairfax while the latter was besieging Colchester, and urgently addressed the army there against religious persecution. He was chosen to preach to parliament on the day after the execution of King Charles I, and succeeded in fulfilling his task without directly mentioning that event.

Another sermon preached on April 29, a vigorous plea for sincerity of religion in high places, won not only the thanks of parliament but the friendship of Oliver Cromwell, who took Owen to Ireland as his chaplain, that he might regulate the affairs of Trinity College, Dublin. He pleaded with the House of Commons for the religious needs of Ireland as some years earlier he had pleaded for those of Wales. In 1650 he accompanied Cromwell on his Scottish campaign. In March 1651 Cromwell, as chancellor of Oxford, gave him the deanery

of Christ Church Cathedral, and made him vice-chancellor in September 1652; in both offices he succeeded the Presbyterian, Edward Reynolds.

During his eight years of official Oxford life Owen showed himself a firm disciplinarian, thorough in his methods, though, as John Locke testifies, the Aristotelian traditions in education underwent no change. With Philip Nye he unmasked the popular astrologer, William Lilly, and in spite of his share in condemning two Quakeresses to be whipped for disturbing the peace, his rule was not intolerant. Anglican services were conducted here and there, and at Christ Church itself the Anglican chaplain remained in the college. While little encouragement was given to a spirit of free inquiry, Puritanism at Oxford was not simply an attempt to force education and culture into "the leaden moulds of Calvinistic theology." Owen, unlike many of his contemporaries, was more interested in the New Testament than in the Old. During his Oxford years he wrote *De Divina Justitia* (1653), an exposition of the dogma that God cannot forgive sin without, an atonement; *On Communion with God* (1657), which has been called a "piece of wise-drawn mysticism"; *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance* (1654), his final attack on Arminianism; *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, a treatise written by order of the Council of State against Socinianism as expounded by John Biddle; *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656), an introspective and analytic work; *Of Schism* (1657), one of the most readable of all his writings; *Of Temptation* (1658), an attempt to recall Puritanism to its cardinal spiritual attitude from the jarring anarchy of sectarianism and the pharisaism which had followed on popularity and threatened to destroy the early simplicity.

Besides his academic and literary concerns, Owen was continually involved in affairs of state. In 1651, on October 24 (after Worcester), he preached the thanksgiving sermon before parliament. In 1652 he sat on a council to consider the condition of Protestantism in Ireland. In October 1653 he was one of several ministers whom Cromwell summoned to a consultation as to church union. In December the degree of D.D. was conferred upon him by his university. In the parliament of 1654 he sat, for a short time, as member for Oxford university, and, with Baxter, was placed on the committee for settling the "fundamentals" necessary for the toleration promised in the Instrument of Government. In the same year he was chairman of a committee on Scottish Church affairs. He was, too, one of the Triers, and appears to have behaved with kindness and moderation in that capacity. As vice-chancellor he acted with readiness and spirit when a Royalist rising in Wiltshire broke out in 1655; his adherence to Cromwell, however, was by no means slavish, for he drew up, at the request of Desborough and Pride, a petition against his receiving the kingship. Thus, when Richard Cromwell succeeded his father as chancellor, Owen lost his vice-chancellorship. In 1658 he took a leading part in the conference of Independents which drew up the Savoy Declaration.

On Oliver Cromwell's death in 1658, Owen joined the Wallingford House party, and though he denied any share in the deposition of Richard Cromwell, he preferred the idea of a simple republic to that of a protectorate. He assisted in the restoration of the Rump Parliament, and, when George Monck began his march into England, Owen, in the name of the Independent churches, to whom Monck was supposed to belong, and who were anxious about his intentions, wrote to dissuade him. In March 1660, the Presbyterian party being uppermost, Owen was deprived of his deanery, which was given back to Reynolds. He retired to Stadham, where he wrote various controversial and theological works, in especial the laborious *Theologoumena Pantodapa*, a history of the rise and progress of theology. The respect in which many of the authorities held his intellectual eminence won him an immunity denied to other Nonconformists. In 1661 the celebrated *Fiat Lux*, a work by the Franciscan monk John Vincent Cane, was published; in it, the oneness and beauty of Roman Catholicism are contrasted with the confusion and multiplicity of Protestant sects. At Clarendon's request Owen answered this in 1662 in his *Animadversions*; and so great was its success that he was offered preferment if he would conform. Owen's condition was liberty to all who agree in doctrine with the Church of England; nothing therefore came of the negotiation.

In 1663 he was invited by the Congregational churches in Boston, Massachusetts, to become their minister, but declined. The Conventicle and Five Mile Acts drove him to London; and in 1666, after the Great Fire, he, like other leading Nonconformist ministers, set up a room for public service and gathered a congregation, composed chiefly of the old Commonwealth officers. Meanwhile he was incessantly writing; and in 1667 he published his *Catechism*, which led to a proposal, "more acute than diplomatic," from Baxter for union. Various papers passed, and after a year the attempt was closed by the following laconical note from Owen: "I am still a well-wisher to these mathematics." It was now, too, that he published the first part of his vast work upon the Epistle to the Hebrews, together with his *Exposition of Psalm 130* and his searching book on *Indwelling Sin*.

In 1669 Owen wrote a spirited remonstrance to the Congregationalists in New England, who, under the influence of Presbyterianism, had shown themselves persecutors. At home, too, he was busy in the same cause. In 1670 Samuel Parker's *Ecclesiastical Polity* attacked the Nonconformists with clumsy intolerance. Owen answered him (*Truth and Innocence Vindicated*); Parker replied offensively. Then Andrew Marvell finally disposed of Parker with banter and satire in *The Rehearsal Transposed*. Owen himself produced a tract *On the Trinity* (1669), and *Christian Love and Peace* (1672).

On the revival of the Conventicle Acts in 1670, Owen was appointed to draw up a paper of reasons which was submitted to the House of Lords in protest. In this or the following year Harvard College invited him to become its president; he received similar invitations from some of the Dutch universities. When King Charles II issued his Declaration of Indul-

gence in 1672, Owen drew up an address of thanks for the opportunity to increase churches and services; Owen was one of the first preachers at the weekly lectures which the Independents and Presbyterians jointly held at Princes' Hall in Broad Street. He was respected by many of the nobility (Congregationalism was by no means the creed of the poor and insignificant), and during 1674 both Charles II and his brother James assured him of their good wishes to the dissenters. Charles gave him 1000 guineas to relieve those upon whom the severe laws had chiefly pressed, and he was even able to procure the release of John Bunyan, whose preaching he ardently admired. In 1674 Owen was attacked by William Sherlock, Dean of St Paul's, whom he easily vanquished, and from this time until 1680 he was engaged upon his ministry and the writing of religious works.

The chief of these were *On Apostasy* (1676), a sad account of religion under the Restoration; *On the Holy Spirit* (1677–1678) and *The Doctrine of Justification* (1677). In 1680, however, Stillingfleet having on May 11 preached his sermon on "The Mischief of Separation," Owen defended the Nonconformists from the charge of schism in his *Brief Vindication*. Baxter and Howe also answered Stillingfleet, who replied in *The Unreasonableness of Separation*. Owen again answered this, and then left the controversy to a swarm of eager combatants. From this time to his death he was occupied with continual writing, disturbed only by suffering from stone and asthma, and by art absurd charge of being concerned in the Rye House Plot. His most important work was his *Treatise on Evangelical Churches*, in which were contained his latest views regarding church government. He died at Ealing, just twenty-one years after he had gone out with so many others on St Bartholomew's day in 1662, and was buried on September 4 in Bunhill Fields.

For engraved portraits of Owen see first edition of S Palmer's *Nonconformists' Memorial and Vertue' Sermons and Tracts* (1721). The chief authorities for the life are Owen's *Works*; W Orme's *Memoirs of Owen*; A Wood's *Athenæ Oxonienses*; R Baxter's *Life*; D Neal's *History of the Puritans*; T Edwards's *Gangræna*; and the various histories of the Independents. See also *The Golden Book of John Owen*, a collection of extracts prefaced by a study of his life and age, by James Moffatt (London).