

**THE LIFE AND WORKS OF SELECTED
PURITANS**

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INTRODUCTION

It has been said that Puritanism “is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”¹ For all its frivolity, this definition constitutes the impression that most people have of the Puritans. However, it is far from an accurate assessment of the Puritans or their outlook on life. “Puritanism was at heart a spiritual movement, passionately concerned with God and godliness.”² This passion for God was reflected in the way they lived, the way they debated, and the way they died. Their influence has had a profound effect on modern Christianity. Hardly any modern scholar will debate the importance of the Puritans to Christianity. It therefore, behooves us to examine them to see what we can learn from their lives and apply to ours.

This paper will review the life and works of three famous Puritans, John Owen and Richard Baxter from 17th century England and John Cotton, a contemporary in the English colonies in America. While the emphasis of the paper will be on John Owen, a short overview of the other two will be presented.

JOHN OWEN (1616-1683)

Life

It has been said that the high summer of Puritan political triumph occurred from 1600 to 1688.³ During this stormy period in English history religious affections and

¹ Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1986), 1.

² J. I. Packer, *A Quest For Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 28.

³ Allen C. Guelzo, “John Owen, Puritan Pacesetter,” *Christianity Today* 20 No. 17 (1976): 14.

politics melded into an inseparable bond that eventually led to civil war between the Puritan Parliament and their Anglican king, Charles I. The Puritans feared that Charles I was attempting to lead the Church of England back toward Catholicism. This war led to the overthrow and execution of Charles I. England, under the rule of Parliament and eventually the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, experienced a period of relative religious freedom. It was an “age of giants” both in the secular and sacred arenas. These dark political times became the golden age of Puritan theology.⁴ It was a time when England resounded with the words of men like John Bunyan, Thomas Goodwin, John Milton, Richard Baxter, and perhaps the greatest theological giant of them all, John Owen.

John Owen was a man of humble beginnings who ultimately spent most of his life on center stage during this turbulent time. He was born in 1616 in Stadham (now Stadhampton), a small village about five miles from Oxford, England. His father, Henry Owen, was the puritan pastor at Stadham, a village with a long puritan tradition.⁵ Very little is known about Owen’s early life. In one of the few references to his past Owen relates that his father was “a Nonconformist all his days, and a painful labourer in the vineyard of the Lord”.⁶ It is also known that John had three brothers and one sister.⁷ William, his elder brother, attended Oxford and was ordained as a minister in the Church of England. His younger brothers Philemon and Henry joined the parliamentary army. Philemon was killed in Ireland in 1649. Henry attained the rank of Major in the Lord

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Peter Toon, *God’s Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen*, (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1971), 2.

⁶ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen of the Christian Life*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 1.

⁷ Ibid.

Protectorate's army and represented Ireland in the Parliaments.⁸

His Nonconformist father ensured that John Owen had a well-rounded education. John Owen's strong Calvinist theology and his conviction that the Scripture is the only authority for faith, worship, and conduct no doubt had its roots in the influence of his father. Henry Owen was a graduate of Oxford and provided for his son's to be educated there. William and John received their grammar school education in a school kept by Edward Sylvester. This prepared them for their entrance into the University at Oxford. Both William and John entered Queen's College in Oxford when John was 12 years old. After completing the required four years of studies in grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, logic, arithmetic, Greek, academic debates, and music, they both received their Bachelor of Arts in 1632. They both continued at Oxford in pursuit of their M.A. degrees. The Masters course consisted of training in Greek, geometry, astronomy, natural philosophy, metaphysics, moral philosophy, and Hebrew. John also took music lessons and learned to play the flute. In 1635, John and his brother William received their M.A. degrees. John then began the seven-year course of theological study for the Bachelor of Divinity Degree.⁹

However, trouble was on the horizon. King Charles I had appointed Archbishop William Laud as Chancellor of the University. Laud was Arminian in theology and disposed toward the "High Church" form of worship with its vestments, liturgies, prayers and kneeling before the alters and at the name of "Jesus." Pressure to conform to these

⁸ Peter Toon, *The Correspondence of John Owen*, (Cambridge: James Clark & Co. LTD., 1970), 3-4.

⁹ Toon, *Correspondence*, 3-6.

requirements led John to leave the university in 1637.¹⁰

After leaving the university, John Owen embarked on his career in ministry. For a time he took the road traveled by many nonconformists by becoming a chaplain and tutor first in the household of Sir Robert Dormer of Ascot and later that of Lord Lovelace at Hurley in Berkshire. However, Lovelace's royalist sympathies led Owen to move to London in 1642.¹¹ It was during this time that the most significant event of his life took place.

Although Owen was well-versed in Calvinist theology and knew how it differed from Lutheranism, Arminianism, and Roman Catholicism, and though he was thoroughly convinced that the Scriptures were the only authority for faith and practice, he had not yet had a personal salvation experience. He found what his heart desired at St. Mary's Church in Aldermanbury. Owen and his cousin attended St. Mary's one Sunday in hopes of hearing a famous Presbyterian, Edward Calamy, preach. When they arrived they found that he would not be preaching that day and instead a country preacher was taking his place. The preacher, whose name Owen could never determine, preached on Matthew 8:26, "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" Like Charles Spurgeon two centuries later, Owen experienced regeneration during the sermon of an unknown preacher. This assurance of salvation provided the security he needed to carry him through a life of ministry. In experiencing the grace of God in salvation he was able to see God's purpose and predestination in every aspect of his life. This led him to strive in his ministry to ensure that church people received the doctrines of the Gospel, but the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 2.

assurance that can only be obtained through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in their hearts.¹²

It was during this time that Owen published his first book, *A Display of Arminianism: being a discovery of the old Pelagian idol, free-will, with the new goddess, contingency, advancing themselves into the throne of God in Heaven to the prejudice of His grace, providence, and supreme dominion over the children of men*. This rather lengthy title indicates the content of book. It was a polemic against the Arminian teachings of human free will and a defense of the doctrine of predestination. Owen dedicated his book to the Committee on Religion, which had been appointed by Parliament to examine all doctrinal and disciplinary innovations. Toon contends that Owen's purpose in writing this book was to make a name for himself as a scholar.¹³ Whatever his purpose, the book did succeed in placing him in the public eye and convinced the Committee on Religion to confer to him the pastorate of Fordham in Essex.¹⁴

This was a harrowing time to begin a first pastorate in England. England was divided between Puritan and Conformist, Calvinist and Arminian, royalist and parliamentist. King Charles I had been forced to convene parliament for the first time in eleven years by his need for funds to fight a war with Scotland. This Parliament, called the "Short Parliament," only met for three weeks before King Charles dissolved it because of its opposition to him. However, when the Scottish army occupied the North

¹² Toon, *God's Statesman*, 12-13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

¹⁴ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 3.

of England, Charles was forced to reconvene the parliament. This Parliament, called the “Long Parliament” because it met for 13 years before being dissolved by the Lord Protectorate, Oliver Cromwell, was determined to put the King in his place and reform the national government. The Parliament forced the King to agree that it could not be dissolved against its own will. They also had Archbishop Laud locked up in the Tower of London. In June of 1642, Parliament sent King Charles a proposed settlement consisting of nineteen propositions basically stripping the King of his power. Charles rejected this settlement and civil war broke out between the King and Parliament.¹⁵ Ultimately, the armies of the King were defeated by the armies of Parliament under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell. King Charles I was executed by order of Parliament for making war on the English people in January 1649.¹⁶ Thus began the “Puritan Protectorate” which lasted until Oliver Cromwell’s death in 1658.¹⁷

During these perilous times Owen pastored first at Fordham, beginning in 1643, and then later at Coggeshall, beginning in 1646. The Committee on Religion appointed Owen to the “living of Fordham”¹⁸ because the previous rector, John Alsop, a supporter of Archbishop Laud and his personal chaplain while in the Tower of London, had deserted Fordham and fled to the Continent.¹⁹ Shortly after arriving in Fordham, John Owen married Mary Rooke. She eventually bore him eleven children. But only one child, a daughter survived to adulthood.²⁰

¹⁵ Toon, *Correspondence*, 9-10.

¹⁶ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 6.

¹⁷ Guelzo, “Puritan Pacesetter”, 15.

¹⁸ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 3.

¹⁹ Toon, *Correspondence*, 14.

²⁰ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 3.

While at Fordham, Owen worked diligently to teach both old and young the doctrines of evangelical Protestantism. To accomplish this goal he wrote two catechisms, one for young people and the other for adults. He also wrote a book entitled *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished*, which was published in 1644. The aim of this book was counsel his people on the attitude they should have toward their pastor and teacher and how they should approach Christian worship. In this book he promoted a moderate Presbyterian form of church polity as opposed to congregationalism which he feared would promote anarchy.²¹ However this position would soon change.

In 1646, rumors of Alsop's death brought an end to his pastorate at Fordham. Since the patrons of the parish had the right to appoint his successor, Owen left Fordham. While between pastorates, he was given the opportunity to preach before the House of Commons on the monthly fast day. The last Wednesday of every month had been set aside as a day of fasting, prayer and hearing of the Word of God in both Houses of Parliament. The sermons preached on the fast day were printed and distributed throughout England. Later in 1646 he was appointed as pastor of Coggeshall at the request of the people of Coggeshall.²²

This change in venue coincided with a change in thinking that would impact the rest of his ministry. During the latter part of his ministry in Fordham Owen had been studying the doctrine of the church. Up until this point he had supported the Presbyterian form of church polity with which he was most familiar. However the controversy between the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists had spurred him to study

²¹ Toon, *God's Statesman*. 17-18.

²² *Ibid.*, 19.

the subject. As part of his studies he read John Cotton's *Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*. Much to his surprise his studies led him to adopt the Congregationalist form of church polity as being the most in line with Scriptures. Upon his arrival in Coggeshall he proceeded to gather a church of visible saints while at the same time performing his parish duties at St. Peters in Coggeshall. The gathered church either met later in the day on Sunday or some other day of the week.²³ For the rest of his life he remained an ardent Congregationalist.

Life as a pastor in Coggeshall in the seventeenth century would not have been very different from life in a rural pastorate today. According to Toon, the typical day would have begun with family prayers after which Owen would retire to study for about five hours while his wife took care of the children and household. The afternoon would have been spent visiting parishioners and catechizing families. An hour in the late afternoon or early evening would be spent playing with the children and talking with his wife. After this, he probably returned to his studies.²⁴ However, this cycle was rudely interrupted by a set of circumstances that catapulted Owen into the national arena.

In June 1648, General Fairfax besieged the royalist army at Colchester. While his army maintained the siege, the General invited Owen to speak to his troops. As a result of his service to the parliamentary army, General Fairfax and Owen became friends. When Colchester finally surrendered in August 1648, Owen was invited to preach the sermon for a day of thanksgiving. In January 1649, Owen was invited to preach before the House of Commons on the day after the execution of Charles I. In April 1649 Owen

²³ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

²⁴ Toon, *Correspondence*, 24.

was again invited to speak before Parliament. In the audience that day was General Oliver Cromwell. Later, when Owen dropped in on General Fairfax to pay his respects, Oliver Cromwell happened to come by and recognizing Owen, he introduced himself to him. This was the beginning of a friendship that lasted many years.²⁵

At their first meeting, Cromwell asked Owen to accompany his army to Ireland as chaplain. Owen asked for time to consider the proposition. But shortly after arrival at home in Coggeshall, the church received a letter asking for Owen's release to accompany Cromwell to Ireland. Owen's brother Philemon, a captain in the army, also came to persuade him to go with Cromwell. Reluctantly, Owen agreed.²⁶

Owen traveled to Ireland with the army in July 1649 and remained there until no later than February 1650. In March 1650 Owen was appointed official preacher in Whitehall. In July 1650, John Owen accompanied the army into Scotland to prevent a Scottish invasion of England. In both Ireland and Scotland Owen maintained a busy preaching schedule.²⁷ In March 1651 while visiting London in preparation for a six weeks visit to Coggeshall, Owen learned that Oliver Cromwell had accepted the office of Chancellor of Oxford. Later that year, the House of Commons voted to appoint Owen as the Dean of Christ Church.

Owen was to remain at Oxford from 1651 to 1660. Although he felt inadequate for the task at hand and despite his protestations he was elevated to Vice Chancellor of the University in 1652.²⁸ He retained this title until 1657 when he managed to persuade

²⁵ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 6-7.

²⁶ Toon, *God's Statesman*, 36-37.

²⁷ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 8.

²⁸ Toon, *God's Statesman*, 52.

Richard Cromwell, who had succeeded his father as Chancellor, to appoint someone else.²⁹ Owen remained as Dean of Christ Church until 1660, when he was removed as royalists took power in Parliament.³⁰ However, his years spent at Oxford were not wasted. When Owen took office at Oxford, the University was in serious financial, scholastic, moral, and spiritual condition. The University had sided with the royalists during the civil war and had impoverished itself supporting the king.³¹ The changing fortunes in the civil war had resulted in the ejection of most of the Laudian staff appointments and their replacement by professors who supported the parliament. This resulted in a theological shift from an Arminian, High-Church philosophy to a more Calvinistic-Presbyterian Church philosophy. These changes brought about turmoil and strife among staff and students alike. Discipline among the students fell so sharply that Owen characterized the students as “mere rabble and the subject of talk by the rabble.”³² Nevertheless, Owen threw himself whole-heartedly into correcting these problems.

Owen was largely successful in turning around the fortunes of the University. He considered his work at the University to be kingdom work. He believed a sound educational institution played a vital role in ensuring a learned ministry that would be able to build vital churches to spread the gospel of Christ throughout the earth.³³ His duties as Dean and later as Vice-Chancellor included making provisions for the worship services, choosing students, appointing chaplains and tutors, administering discipline,

²⁹ Ibid., 77-78.

³⁰ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 8.

³¹ Guelzo, *Puritan Pacesetter*, 15.

³² Toon, *God's Statesman*, 51-52.

³³ Christopher R. Smith, “‘Up and Doing’: The Pragmatic Puritan Eschatology of John Owen,” *Evangelical Quarterly* vol 61 no 4 (1989), 349.

overseeing the property, collecting rents and tithes, awarding scholarships, and taking care of almsmen at Christ Church hospital.³⁴ He took his administrative work in stride, but he considered his preaching in and around Oxford and his lecturing and debating at the University to be the most important aspect of his work.³⁵ As a reflection of this, he required university Chaplains who had their Masters of Arts and other students with sufficient ability to fill vacant pulpits in the surrounding area on Sundays. Students were also required to give reports to their tutors on the sermons that they heard each Sunday.³⁶

By using his power with wisdom and toleration, Owen was able to bring a sense of security and stability to the University. His tolerance, impartiality, discipline and encouragement of good study habits and good conduct enable him to succeed in curing the worst ills of the university and to solicit the praise of even his detractors.³⁷ He summarized his achievements at his farewell address in 1657 noting that “Professors salaries...have been recovered and paid ...offices of respectability have been maintained; the rights and privileges of the university have been defended...the treasury is tenfold increased...many...have been promoted to various honors and benefices...new exercises have been introduced and established; old ones have been duly performed; reformation of manners has been diligently studied....”³⁸ Wishing them all prosperity, he entered the next phase of his life.

Part of the reason for Owen’s departure from Oxford was a distinct cooling of his

³⁴ Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 54.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

³⁷ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

relationship with Oliver Cromwell. From their initial meeting in 1649 until 1657, Owen and Cromwell shared a firm friendship. However, Owen opposed a movement in Parliament in 1657 to make Cromwell king of England. This opposition constrained Cromwell to refuse the kingship, and resulted in a significant change in the relationship between Owen and Cromwell. When Cromwell was named as Lord Protector in 1658, Owen was not even invited to the ceremony.³⁹ Oliver Cromwell died later in 1658 and was succeeded by his son, Richard.

During the years from 1649-1657 Owen was very active in national affairs, often preaching before Parliament on their fast days. He was also active with Thomas Goodwin and others in trying to establish a national policy on religion in England that would assure orthodox Puritan theology was preached from the pulpits in England. Their proposals to Parliament were intended to ensure “the fullest utilization of educated, godly men in the task of preaching, and...the removal from parishes of ignorant, scandalous, and non-resident clergy.”⁴⁰ These proposals included a process for reviewing and removing if necessary parish ministers who did not meet their standards for orthodoxy or who were not fulfilling their preaching ministry. Their aim was to achieve maximum cooperation between Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists. These proposals were “basically conservative and cautious in that conventicles were carefully controlled, tithes retained, and graduates of the Universities used to staff the parishes.”⁴¹ The proposals were later amended to ensure that Socians, and Unitarians had no legal part in

³⁹ Ibid., 12-13.

⁴⁰Peter Toon, *God's Statesman*, 84.

⁴¹ Ibid., 85.

English religious life and that Catholic and Anglican forms of worship were prohibited.⁴²

These proposals were never adopted by Parliament, but many of them were later incorporated into Cromwell's Instrument of Government in Articles Thirty-five through Thirty-seven. Although these articles did not go as far as Owen would have liked in defining the Christian religion, it did prohibit Anglican and Catholic forms of worship. Ordinances were later added to this document to provide for a group of overseers to guide the selection of ministers in the parishes of England and Wales. Owen and his brother William became part of this board.⁴³ Richard Baxter summed up the work of this board by saying that

44 “certain of its members were ‘over-busie and over-rigid...against all that were Arminians, and too particular in inquiring after evidences of sanctification . . . and too lax in their admission of unlearned and erroneous men that favoured antinomianism and anabaptism.’ But he was willing to admit that ‘ so great was the benefit above the hurt which they brought to the church, that many thousands of souls blest God for the faithful ministers who whom they let in, and grieved when the prelatists afterwards (between 1660 and 1662) cast them out again.’”

During 1656 and 1657 Owen was often called to London to help mediate between the Scots on who should be allowed to fill vacant parishes. Even though a board was set up to select men for these positions, the parties in Scotland struggled to gain control of the board. Eventually they deferred to Parliament to settle the issue and Owen was again selected to help, however by this time his opposition to the appointment of Cromwell as King had made him out of favor with Cromwell. Therefore, his proposals were not accepted.⁴⁵

One of Owen's last services in the Cromwell administration was to attend a

⁴² Ibid., 86.

⁴³ Ibid., 90-93.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 97-99.

meeting in November 1657 of the Committee on the Protestants of Piedmont. This committee had been organized in 1655 to provide aid to persecuted Protestants in the Piedmont. Cromwell's health deteriorated and he died in 1658. During his extended illness, his former chaplain, John Owen was not summoned to minister to him.⁴⁶

The death of Cromwell led to a new phase in Owen's life. Cromwell's son was appointed to take his father's place, however the Protectorate was to be short-lived after the death of Oliver Cromwell.

In September 1658, John Owen participated in a meeting of congregational churches at Savoy Palace. Owen was selected to help write the *Declaration of Faith* and order that became known as *The Savoy Declaration*. Owen is generally given credit for being the author of the preface to this declaration. The main purpose of *The Savoy Declaration* was set forth the principles and doctrines of Congregationalist to defend themselves of accusations that they were schismatics and heretics. *The Declaration* was presented to Richard Cromwell by Thomas Goodwin in October 1658. Their goal was to achieve religious toleration for Congregationalist under the new government.⁴⁷

These again were turbulent times in England. It appears the Owen worked hard to try to maintain some form of unity among the various protestant factions in England. Perhaps with this in view he formed a gathered church consisting of army officers and their families in London in 1659.⁴⁸ His association with these army officers eventually led to him being accused of helping to bring the fall of Richard Cromwell's government,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 101-102.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 103-107.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 109-110.

a charge which he denied.

In March 1659, Owen was removed as Dean of Christ Church. He quickly and quietly disappeared from the University and from the center of public life. He moved his family to his home in Stadhampton. In April, Cromwell's Parliament was dissolved, effectively ending his Protectorate. The army leaders with the help of Owen recalled the Parliament in May. At this meeting, Richard Cromwell resigned.⁴⁹ In 1660, Owen's worst fears were realized when the Parliament voted to restore the Stuart monarchy, calling Charles II back to England.⁵⁰

Restoration of the monarchy led to a period of persecution for the Puritans. The four acts of the Clarendon Code eventually led to the expulsion of over 2000 Puritans, including John Owen, from their pulpits.⁵¹ The four acts of the Clarendon Code are (1) the Corporation Act (1661), which required all municipal office holders to renounce the Covenant and to take the sacraments according to the Church of England; (2) The Act of Uniformity (1662), which required Episcopal ordination of all ministers and their assent to the Prayer Book; (3) the Conventicle Act (1664) which made it illegal for five or more people to assemble for religious purposes; and (4) the Five Mile Act (1665), which forbade all preachers and teachers who had not conformed to come within five miles of the town or parish where they had previously taught.⁵²

Owen came through this period relatively unscathed because of protection from powerful friends. However, he did suffer the loss of his ministry, separation from his

⁴⁹Ibid., 112-113.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 121.

⁵¹ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 15.

⁵² Toon, *God's Statesman*, 125.

family, and imprisonment. In 1665 he was arrested under the Coventicle Act for holding an assembly in his home. During this time he had many opportunities to go abroad to escape persecution, once in 1664 as the president of Harvard in Massachusetts, and later as the pastor of a Boston church, but he opted to stay in England.⁵³

After the Plague of London in 1665 and the Great Fire, Owen returned to preaching in London. He took this opportunity to plead for religious freedom for nonconformists by writing two pamphlets in 1667, *Indulgence and Toleration Considered and A Peace Offering in an Apology and Humble Plea for Indulgence and Liberty*.⁵⁴ However, toleration was not granted until the passage the Declaration of Indulgence in 1672.⁵⁵

In 1673, Owens congregation united with another London fellowship. By this time he was the acknowledged leader of the nonconformist cause.⁵⁶ He apparently developed an “unusual friendship” with King Charles II, who gave him money to relieve the persecuted dissenters and offered him a bishop’s miter if he would conform to the Church of England. But he chose to remain a nonconformist.⁵⁷ During this time he was able to help John Bunyan get his *Pilgrim’s Progress* published by his publisher, Nathaniel Ponder. He also seems to have helped relieve some of the excessive hardships Bunyan suffered while in prison.⁵⁸

In 1676, Owen’s wife Mary died. Within eighteen months, he married a wealthy

⁵³ Guelzo, “John Owen”, 15.

⁵⁴ Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 132-133.

⁵⁵ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁷ Guelzo, “John Owen”, 15.

⁵⁸ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 16.

young widow, Michel D'Oyley.⁵⁹

Owen was now drawing near the end of his life. By the influence of his powerful friends he had been spared most of the persecutions his other brethren suffered. But he worked tirelessly from 1650 until his death to gain legal toleration for nonconformists.⁶⁰ Towards the end of his life he was afflicted with severe asthma and gallstones. Often he was incapable of preaching to his congregation. During these times, he was assisted by David Clarkson, Alexander Shields and Robert Ferguson.

A busy author until the end, he was working on the final stages of publication of *Meditations on the Glory of Christ* on the day he died. He passed from this world on August 23, 1683. He was buried at Bunhill Fields eleven days later.⁶¹

Works

John Owen was a prolific author. During his lifetime Owen wrote “16 volumes of divinity, together with a volume of Latin works and orations, and in addition several volumes of detailed commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews.”⁶² Packer writes:

Owen was a theologian of enormous intellectual energy. His knowledge and memory were vast, and he had an unusual power of organizing his material. His thought was not subtle or complicated, as, for instance, was Baxter's. His ideas, like Norman pillars, leave in the mind an impression of massive grandeur precisely by reason of the solid simplicity of their structure. Of their content, it is enough to say that for method and substance Owen reminds one frequently of Calvin...he is constantly and consciously near the center of seventeenth-century

⁵⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁰ Toon, *God's Statesman*, 149.

⁶¹ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 18.

⁶² Maurice Roberts, “Richard Baxter and His Gospel,” (reprinted from the *Banner of Truth Magazine*, no.339, December 1991 by permission,); available from <http://www.puritansermons.com/baxter/baxter19.html>; accessed 13 May 2002, p. 2 of 6.

Reformed thought throughout. His studied unconcern about style in presenting his views, a conscientious protest against the self-conscious literary posturing of the age, conceals their uncommon clarity and straightforwardness from superficial readers. He wrote, rather, for those who, once they take up a subject, cannot rest till they see to the bottom of it, and who find exhaustiveness to exhausting, but satisfying and refreshing. His works have been truly described as a series of theological systems, each organized around a different centre. He would never view parts in isolation from the whole.⁶³

His first published work, *A Display of Arminianism*, propelled him at the age of 26 into the national spotlight of seventeenth-century England where he remained the rest of his life. This work, like most of his following works were a defense of the Reformed theological position. It was “no masterpiece but...a thorough defense of the Calvinistic doctrine of the bondage of the will to sin and of the absolute predestination of God...”⁶⁴

Another of his major theological works appeared in 1647, *Salus Electorum, Sanguis Jesu: or the Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. This was another defense of the orthodox Calvinistic doctrine that the death of Christ was intended by God to be a redemption of the elect only, not of the world in general.⁶⁵ Guelzo call this “the most prized of his works” in which Owen “characteristically alternates between fearsome citadels of logic and bright sallies of wit.” He goes on to note that he has heard “any number of Reformed preachers on the subject still using, in some form or other, the same headings and arguments that Owen set forth three hundred years ago.”⁶⁶

While Owen was at Oxford he wrote two other theological books in Latin:

Diatriba De Divina Jusitia (1653), and *Theologoumena Pantodapa* (1661). The

⁶³ Packer, *A Quest*, 193.

⁶⁴ Toon, *God's Statesman*, 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶⁶ Guelzo, “John Owen”, 15.

Diatriba addressed the intellectual question as to whether or not God must punish sin, or whether He could simply forgive it without the atonement. Owens answer was that the Atonement was necessary because of God's holy and righteous nature. The *Theologoumena* was a Latin work with a Greek title. It outlined the nature, rise and progress of "true" theology from the time of Adam to the New Testament.⁶⁷

But perhaps his greatest work was his work on the Holy Spirit. Ferguson call this work "his greatest contribution to the systematization of doctrine." He notes that Owen himself wrote of it, "I know not any who ever went before me in this design of representing the whole economy of the Holy Spirit."⁶⁸ This work was published in three installments beginning with *Pneumatologia, or a Discourse on the Holy Spirit* in 1674. The remaining two installments, *the Discourse of Spiritual Gifts* and *the Spirit as Comforter*, were published posthumously in 1693. Charles Ryrie has described this as a work that has never been superseded.⁶⁹

Besides his theological works, Owen also wrote practical works such as *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* (1644) which was designed to help people understand how they should relate to one another, their minister, and worship. Along the same lines, during his first pastorate he wrote two catechisms, one for young people and one for adults. These were used as he went around the village teaching both young and old the basic doctrines of Protestantism.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Toon, *God's Statesman*, 56.

⁶⁸ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 17.

⁶⁹ Guelzo, "John Owen", 15.

⁷⁰ Toon, *God's Stateman*, 17-18.

Besides his books, Owen also published many sermons. These sermons were preached with the intent of bringing his hearers into a realization of their own sinfulness, their need for redemption, and having attained that, their need for personal holiness. His sermons had the power to penetrate to the very soul of a person. Hence one reader wrote that his sermon, *On the Nature and Power of Temptation*, makes a person feel that they were written for him alone. When Rabbi Duncan told his students to read Owens sermon, *Indwelling Sin*, he warned them "...prepare for the knife."⁷¹

These are but a small sample of the works of John Owen, but they give some insight into not only the power of his intellect, but the depth of his personal relationship with Christ and his love and care for the spiritual welfare of his fellowman.

Contribution to Modern Christianity

John Owen was considered to be *the* theologian of the Puritan movement.⁷² He has been called "the greatest divine who ever wrote in English." Though he was a great scholar he was thoroughly convinced of the primacy of biblical preaching over theological logic chopping. His high regard for preaching can be seen in his response to King Charles II when he asked Owen why anyone would want to listen to an uneducated tinker like John Bunyan preach. Owen is said to have responded, "Could I possess, the tinker's abilities for preaching, please your majesty, I would gladly relinquish all my learning."⁷³

⁷¹ Packer, *A Quest*, 194.

⁷² Ferguson, *John Owen*, 19.

⁷³ Guelzo, "John Owen", 14, 15.

Yet even Owen's enemies acknowledge that his ministry and preaching were of a stature that deserved notice. His great emphasis was not in turning out theological treatises, but in pursuing personal holiness. He was a pastor who took great pains to build up his congregations in the faith.

But perhaps the greatness of John Owen can be summed up from the words of his own pen. He writes:

“I hope that I may own in sincerity, that my hearts desire unto God, and the chief design of my life in the station wherein the good providence of God has placed me, are, that mortification and universal holiness may be promoted in my own and in the hearts and way of others, to the glory of God; that so the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ may be adorned in all things.”

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What greater aspiration can a man have for his life and works than this? His greatest contribution to following generations was not in the works that he left, but in the example that he set. He was a man who sought peace with all men, willing to compromise wherever possible. Yet at the same time he was a man who stood for his convictions, even in the face of persecution and possible death, refusing to budge one inch when purity of doctrine and church polity were at stake. He was a man of great personal holiness and deep convictions, who even till his death was pressing onward toward the mark of the upward call in Christ Jesus.

RICHARD BAXTER (1615-1691)

Richard Baxter has been called “the most outstanding pastor, evangelist, and writer on practical and devotional themes that Puritanism produced.”

⁷⁴ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 18.

⁷⁵ A controversial figure in his own lifetime, he has survived with the reputation of being an “incomparable pastoral evangelist.”

⁷⁶ Roberts writes of Baxter that he was “first of all a preacher.”

⁷⁷ Though he lived over three hundred years ago, his influence is still felt and several of his works, such as the *Reformed Pastor* are still in print. His life and works will be summarized here in brief.

Life

Richard Baxter was born on November 12, 1615 at Rowton, in Shropshire. His mother’s name was Beatrice. His father, Richard Baxter, was a free holder, possessing a moderate estate. However, his estate was entangled with debt due to his father’s youthful addiction to gaming.⁷⁸ Baxter reports that this required his father to “have some excess worldly cares before it was freed.”⁷⁹ This may have accounted for the paucity of his education.

Orme writes that his early education was “imperfectly conducted.”⁸⁰ His childhood instructors were incompetent or drunks. He received most of his classical education from the free school at Wroxeter. He never attended a university, therefore he never had any great knowledge Hebrew or Greek, and his Latin, Orme observes, was

⁷⁵ Packer, *A Quest*, 302.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁷⁷ Roberts, “Richard Baxter”, 1.

⁷⁸ William Orme, *The Life and Times of the Reverend Richard Baxter*, vol. I (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1831), 2.

⁷⁹ Lynell Friesen, “The Life and Ministry of Richard Baxter”, *IIIM Magazine* online, Vol 2, No. 19 (May 8 to May 14, 2000), available from <http://www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/ch/CH.h.Friesen.Baxter.1.html>; accessed 13 May 2002, p. 1 of 5.

⁸⁰ Orme, *Life*, 11.

little better than that of a barbarian.⁸¹

After finishing his education he taught grammar school in Dudley, Worcester. It was here in 1639 that he received his ordination by the Bishop of Worcester. He remained in Dudley about a year and then moved to Bridgenorth where he remained until 1641. During this period, his studies led him to be a non-conformist with respect to the Church of England.⁸²

In 1641, Baxter answered a call to become the minister at Kidderminster. He arrived there in April 1641 and remained there for two years. Then the English Civil war broke out and he became a chaplain in the Parliamentary army until 1647. During this time he combated sectarianism in the New Model Army.⁸³ After a bout of illness, he returned to Kidderminster in 1647 and remained there until April 1660. These thirteen years were the most fruitful of his life.⁸⁴

At Kidderminster Baxter developed the role of the pastoral evangelist. He developed a standard of ministry that countless godly men have pursued as their goal. Friesen notes that at Kidderminster Baxter had the most fruitful Puritan ministry anywhere recorded.⁸⁵ England had never seen a ministry like it. By the 1650s Baxter was the acknowledged role model for pastors throughout Puritan England.⁸⁶ It was during this time of his ministry that he wrote most of his works, including *The Reformed Pastor*, *The Call to the UnConverted*, and the *Saint's Everlasting Rest*.

⁸¹ Ibid., 11-15.

⁸² Ibid., 25-31.

⁸³ Friesen, "Life", 2-3.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Packer, *A Quest*, 304.

In 1660, Baxter left Kidderminster for unknown reasons, but perhaps due to the changing political climate. In 1661, he participated in the Savoy Conference, along with John Owen. He suffered with the other Puritan nonconformists after the Great Ejection of 1662.

In 1662 he married for the first time to Mary Charleton. They remained married for 19 years until her death in 1681. During these years they moved from place to place in the vicinity of London.⁸⁷

Baxter was jailed twice during his lifetime. Once for 6 months in New Prison in Clerkenwell for preaching, then later from February 1685 to November 1686 in King's Bench Prison.⁸⁸ His last years were filled with much persecution and physical suffering. He died December 8, 1691 after a prolonged illness.

Richard Baxter, for all his accomplishments, had many faults. Packer writes that he “was a big man, big enough to have large faults and make large errors.”⁸⁹ Although he was the chief spokesman of the nonconformists after the ejections of 1662, his outspokenness and censorious attitude often did more harm than good. He was always respected for his godliness and pastoral accomplishments, but in his dealings with his peers he was a complete failure. “The plain fact is that Baxter insulted people, treating them as knaves or fools, and that has never been a way to win friends.”⁹⁰ Sir James Stephens writes, “Among his contemporaries, Baxter appears to have been the object of general reverence, and as of general unpopularity. His temper was austere and irritable,

⁸⁷ Friesen, “Life”, 4.

⁸⁸ Friesen, “Life”, 4-5.

⁸⁹ Packer, *A Quest*, 302.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 303.

his address ungracious and uncouth. While cordially admitting the merits of each rival sect, he concurred with none, but was the common censor and opponent of all.”⁹¹ In retrospect, Baxter confessed, “I am too much inclined to such words in controversial writings, which are too keen and apt to provoke the person whom I write against...I have a strong inclination to speak of a subject just as it is, and to call a spade, a spade...But I unfeignedly confess that it is faulty....”⁹²

Besides his personality faults, his theology was also inclined to stir up the passions of orthodox Puritans. He developed “an eclectic middle route between the Reformed, Arminian, and Roman doctrines of grace: interpreting the kingdom of God in terms of contemporary political ideas, he explained Christ’s death as an act of universal redemption (penal and vicarious, but not strictly substitutionary), in virtue of which God has made a new law offering pardon and amnesty to the penitent. Repentance and faith, being obedience to this law, are the believers saving righteousness....”⁹³ His theology was called “Baxterianism” or “Neonomianism” because of the new law idea at its heart. Many saw this as a dangerous alteration of the content of the gospel, which it proved to be because it led to the development of Neonomian Moderatism in Scotland and moralistic Unitarianism in England.⁹⁴

But the faults that made him odious to his peers may have contributed to his success in dealing with the plain, common people of his parish. He thought so, writing

⁹¹Francis John, ed., *An Excerpt From Reliquiæ Baxterianæ and An Essay by Sir James Stephen on Richard Baxter*, (New York, NY: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1910), 152.

⁹² John, *An Excerpt*, 57-58.

⁹³ Packer, *A Quest*, 303.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

that his method of dealing with people came from “a long custom of studying how to speak and write in the keenest manner to the common, ignorant, and ungodly people, without which keenness to them, no sermon, nor book does much good...”⁹⁵ And it was his success as a pastor that mattered most to him and his people. His success at Kidderminster speaks for itself. Kidderminster contained about 800 home and 2000 adults, most of who came to a solid Christian faith through Baxter’s work.⁹⁶ He was a consummate preacher, in his own words “preaching as a dying man to dying men.”

Works

Richard Baxter was incredibly prolific in his output as a writer. He wrote approximately twice as much as John Owen. His total literary output would have amounted to approximately 60 octavo volumes or thirty-forty thousand close printed pages.⁹⁷ Space will only allow a brief mention of three of his most famous works.

His *Call to the Unconverted* was widely circulated in his lifetime. It was used for evangelism throughout England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany and even to the American Indians. Twenty thousand copies of it were made the first year of its publication.⁹⁸ It was basically an exposition of seven doctrines derived from Ezekiel 33:11.⁹⁹

His *Saint’s Everlasting Rest* (1650) was written to encourage God’s people to look beyond this world to the glory that awaits them in heaven. It was written to “show how the hope of glory, analyzed by bible study and internalized by meditation, should

⁹⁵ John, *An Excerpt*, 57.

⁹⁶ Packer, *A Quest*, 304.

⁹⁷ Roberts, “Richard Baxter”, 2.

⁹⁸ Packer, *A Quest*, 63.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

give believers energy and direction for present living....”¹⁰⁰

Perhaps his most famous work of all was his work on pastoral care, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656). This work uses Acts 20:28 to form a basis for Baxter’s philosophy of ministry. It deals with the pastor’s labors, confessions, motives, constraints, and dedication.¹⁰¹ MacArthur calls it “profoundly deep and intensely spiritual as it flows from the heart of a humble pastor to other pastors.”¹⁰²

These are but a small sampling of Richard Baxter’s works, but they do represent a cross-section of the wide range of his pastoral abilities that made him so successful.

Contribution to Modern Christianity

Richard Baxter is not remembered today so much for his contributions to theology, but for his supreme example of successful pastoral ministry. His book *The Reformed Pastor* is still quoted and recommended for pastors.

JOHN COTTON (1584-1652)

John Cotton was an early contemporary of both John Owen and Richard Baxter. He is included here for his influence in converting many Puritans to the Congregational form of church government, a position which he himself was initially against. His most influential convert to this form of church polity was John Owen.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 334.

¹⁰¹ John MacArthur, Jr., ed., *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry*, (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), 57.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Life

John Cotton was born December 4, 1585, in Derby, Derbyshire, England.¹⁰³ His father was a lawyer who was sympathetic to the Puritan movement.¹⁰⁴ He matriculated at age thirteen as sizar at Trinity College, Cambridge. He was an excellent student, especially in ancient languages. However, due to insufficient funds, he had to transfer from Trinity College to Emmanuel College. This in effect was a conscious alignment with Puritan principles because Emmanuel was a Puritan stronghold.

Cotton remained at Emmanuel for nine years, receiving his M.A. in 1606. While at Emmanuel his reputation as a scholar and orator increasing grew so that he was assured of a large audience wherever he went. Also, significantly, he became a regenerate Christian in 1609 under the preaching of Richard Sibbes. His conversion led him to an understanding that his pulpit style had, up until that point, been an exercise of intellect. Consequently, he chose to preach from that point on in a plain style that appealed to the hearts of his hearers.

Cotton was ordained as a priest in the Church of England in 1610. Two years later he was interviewed by a delegation from Boston, Lincolnshire, an incorporated town that controlled the living of the Vicar of St. Botolph's Church. They were seeking a minister of reforming principle and John Cotton fit the bill. Although, Cotton was hesitant to take on such a responsibility, and the Bishop of Lincoln was hesitant to send him, the aldermen persuaded both. Thus Cotton began a 21-year career as the non -

¹⁰³ Encyclopedia Britannica, 2001 domestic ed., "John Cotton", [CDROM]

¹⁰⁴ The information on Cotton's life is taken, unless otherwise noted from Larzer Ziff, ed., *John Cotton on the Churches of New England*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1968), pp. 6-38.

conforming pastor of St. Botolph's Church.

During his tenure he managed to disarm the Arminians in his parish and to institute a strict communion with the saints within the parish. He was able to skillfully navigate through the dangerous waters of nonconformity by a combination of his great learning and equitable temper, and the practical political skills of his alderman who protected him from oppression from the Laudian Bishops.

However this was to eventually come to an end. In 1632 he received word that he had been summoned to the High Court to answer for his nonconforming practices. He fled to London. While there he was visited by Thomas Goodwin and John Davenport, who attempted to persuade him to conform. However, instead of converting Cotton, they were converted to further nonconformity. Thus Cotton "propelled Goodwin onto the path that would lead him to check the Presbyterian party at the Westminster Assembly and Davenport onto the road that would lead him to found and shape the colony of New Haven along the line of Cotton's theocratic theory."¹⁰⁵

While in London, Cotton made up his mind to immigrate to New England. Therefore in June 1633 he boarded the Griffin and sailed to New England. However, all would not be smooth sailing in New England. Cotton already had reservations about the churches in New England. He had heard about their Separatist tendencies, with which he disagreed. He was a nonconformist, but he was not a Separatist. The ultimate compromise that he worked out through study and meditation set the standard for church polity in New England and had an impact on the nonconformists in England.

¹⁰⁵ Ziff, *John Cotton*, 13.

Cotton was enthusiastically welcomed in New England. He was soon installed as the teacher of the church in Boston. While in this position, he pondered the differences in church polity with what he held to be ideal. While he was pondering these things, he was called into action by the actions of Roger Williams. Williams was advocating full separation from the Church of England and from those churches in New England that held communion with them. Williams had been called as pastor to the church in Salem, however the other New England churches opposed his selection as did the magistrates. Ultimately, Williams was banned and Salem chose a new pastor before Cotton had a chance to convince Williams of the error of his ways. However these events did force Cotton to reevaluate and come to a decision on his stand on church polity and Separatism.

His position on these issues were first expounded in a sermon delivered at Salem in June 1636. In this sermon, entitled *Sermon Deliver'd at Salem*, he confessed that though he was initially opposed to the congregational polity he had found in place in New England, he had through his study of scripture determined that it was justified by the Bible. He had come to agree with the Salem church that regardless of a Christian's membership in the catholic church, he still must covenant with a local church before he was accepted into full membership and able to share in the sacraments. However, he did not advocate separation from the Church of England. He came up with a rather unique idea that since all Christians were members of the catholic church by a covenant of grace, it would be unchristian to insist on complete separation and disfellowship with members of the Church of England because some of its practices were corrupt, because no church could be perfect. Rather they should be dealt with through the everlasting covenant of

grace because the invisible church of all the saints was more important than a covenant of a particular visible church. So while he defended their right to deny the sacraments to nonmembers of the particular church, this should not lead to complete separation from other churches or Christians who were members of other churches.

Cotton's emphasis on grace made him a popular speaker in New England. But it almost led to his ruin in the 1638 trials of Ann Hutchinson. Hutchinson and her followers were some of the more devout members of his parish. Cotton at first, considered them as being misled, but not dangerous. Ultimately he was forced to abandon them completely as it became clear that they were aiming at social revolution and were willing to pervert doctrine to achieve it.

In the 1640's Cotton was drawn into defending the Congregational church polity against Presbyterianism. This debate was essentially an English debate as the Puritans in England tried to determine what form of church polity should be used alongside and eventually replace the episcopal system. Cotton was invited to attend the Westminster Assembly, but was unable to attend. However, in answer to charges against Congregational church polity, he published *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* in 1644. The purpose of the work was to prove that the church founded in apostolic times was a congregational church. He insisted that all church authority initially resides in the hands of the believers, is only delegated by them, and must ultimately be referred back to them. This proved to be Cotton's most influential and lasting work.

This controversy continued throughout the remainder of Cotton's life. He was compelled to write several other treatises defending congregationalism. He died in December 1652 still defending his position.

Works

John Cotton's most influential and lasting work was *The Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven*. Since this was previously discussed it will not be reviewed here.

Contribution to Modern Christianity

The issues first discussed Cotton in his *Keys* had little lasting influence in England. Although it convinced many Puritans such as John Owen and Thomas Goodwin to adopt congregationalism, it was never incorporated as a nationwide system of church government in England. However, it did have a profound impact on churches in New England and ultimately introduced the ideas of civil liberty and democracy into colonial life. These ideas eventually found their way into the system of government adopted by the United States. This is particularly interesting in view of the fact that John Cotton was not a proponent of democracy in civil government. He wrote, "Democracy I do not conceive that ever God did ordain as a fit government either for church or commonwealth."¹⁰⁶ However, he planted the seed that was to grow to full bloom in the American government and in many of its churches.

CONCLUSION

This brief study of the lives of these three Puritans reveals the impact that godly men can have on their own generation and the generations that follow. Their passion for God and their willingness to suffer for their convictions provide us an example that we would be wise to emulate.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 27-28.

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