

# Editorial: Learning from John Owen

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Why should we study people from the past, especially the distant past? Why not merely focus on current issues that the church faces, for after all, what do people from a previous era have to teach us today? Two responses can be given to these questions, one from Scripture and the second from experience.

First, as we study Scripture, it is significant to note how often we are told to learn from past people, events, and history. Many places teach us this, but probably the best place is Hebrews 11. In order to encourage the church to remain faithful to Christ and the gospel, the author unpacks the glory of Christ and his work from the OT, and then exhorts the church to run the race set before them with perseverance like the saints of old. That is why in chapter 11, the author walks through the great “hall of fame” of faithful OT saints, who persevered under unbelievable pressure as they took God at his Word, believed his promises, and lived their lives looking forward to the fulfillment of those promises centered in the coming of Christ. The author appeals to the example of these saints to encourage the church to do likewise in their day. From the examples of past individuals, the church is to learn

how to be faithful in the present era.

In fact, the author not only encourages present-day Christians from past examples, he also exhorts and challenges them to walk by faith *in a greater way* since now that Christ has come, we, who live post-resurrection, see more clearly how God has kept all of his promises in Christ, something OT saints never witnessed. Scripture's appeal to people from the past, then, is for our instruction and as such, it gives us warrant and incentive to learn from those who have already run the race, kept the faith, and serve as examples of how we ought to live today.

Second, if we are honest, we know that to ignore the past and not to learn from it causes more harm than good. The famous statement is true: If we do not learn from history, we are doomed to repeat its mistakes. As Scripture reminds us, "there is nothing new under the sun," and the study of past people and events helps correct our myopic vision, challenges us to learn from those who have thought deeply about God's Word, and who have applied it to their lives in challenging circumstances. We often learn by example.

For these reasons (and many more), we are devoting this issue of *SBJT* to an historical figure who has much to teach us today, namely theologian and pastor, John Owen (1616-1683). Although Owen lived over 300 years ago, his life and writings have much to teach us. Owen was a remarkable individual. During his 67 years of life, he wrote numerous volumes on biblical exposition and theology of the highest caliber. He served as a theologian at Oxford University, a pastor, and statesman under Oliver Cromwell. The 17<sup>th</sup> century was a unique time in history, which witnessed many changes, and Owen addressed these changes well.

On the one hand, Owen sought to work out faithfully the insights of the Reformation, especially in responding to the ongoing challenge of Rome. Like the Reformers, Owen stood against the theology of the Roman Catholic Church and sought to defend the great *solas* of the Reformation. He wrote treatises on Scripture, justification, the Holy Spirit, and the atoning work of Christ. He warranted what he wrote from Scripture, and he grounded Reformation theology in the sovereign, triune God of Scripture who has taken the initiative to save, and apart from him there is no salvation.

On the other hand, Owen also battled the growing rise of views that denied the Christian faith. His day saw the rise of Socinianism and other views that denied the orthodox view of the Trinity, undermined the uniqueness of

Christ, and rejected retributive justice as central to understanding the nature of the cross. Owen's era saw the beginning of the Enlightenment, and in his work, along with other post-Reformation theologians, Owen wonderfully defended "the faith once delivered to the saints." Think for example about his volumes on Christology. In ways that the Reformers did not fully develop, he argued for an atonement that was *necessary* if God is going to save us, thus providing strong biblical and theological support to viewing the cross as a penal substitutionary sacrifice for us. Owen was convinced that Christ's work was effective and that it accomplished all that the triune God had planned from eternity. In standing against various heresies and challenges to Reformation theology, Owen valiantly defended the exclusivity and sufficiency of Christ in his day, something we must equally do today.

However, as much as we think of Owen as a theologian, he was also a pastor. He labored faithfully in the church and in his own life experienced much adversity and suffering. Of his eleven children, ten died in infancy. He also experienced the loss of his first wife. Yet, in the midst of such difficulties, Owen wrote much about the practical outworking of the gospel in the Christian life. He not only articulated the great truths of the gospel, he worked out the implications of justification, communion with the triune God, the nature of sin and temptation, in very practical ways. Owen was a theologian and pastor who longed to see the church grow in Christ, and he sought to see continual reform among God's people according to the truth. In a day plagued by nominal Christianity, Owen called the church to doctrinal and practical fidelity.

In truth, what motivated Owen more than anything else was his God-centered focus and his desire to see Christ magnified. In every discussion, whether in its specific details and fine theological nuance, or his teaching Scripture to people in the local church, Owen always sought to point people to the glory of the triune God in the face of Christ. For Owen teaching theology was more than a mere vocation; theology was to transform our lives, which is what it did in the life of Owen. Many have noted that reading John Owen is not an easy task. His writing is not only voluminous but it is very difficult. It takes time to get used to his very long sentences and his rich vocabulary, but working through his writings pays great dividends.

In this issue, we have sought to capture something of the depth and breadth of Owen's contribution to theology and his understanding of the Christian

life. After situating Owen's life and thought vis-à-vis his time period, other articles think through Owen's defense of the great doctrine of justification, his disagreements with other Protestant pastors such as Richard Baxter, his defense of historic Christianity over against the heresy of Socinianism, and his robust defense of Scripture. All of these discussions are helpful for us today as we are called to be faithful to God's Word and to proclaim the gospel in our generation. In addition, our *SBJT Forum* rounds out the discussion by answering such practical questions as: Why has Owen made a comeback in theological discussion today? How does Owen help us think about sanctification in terms of the mortification of sin? How does Owen help us think about assurance? How does a theology of the incarnation work itself out in Owen's understanding of the Christian life?

The articles and forum discussions in this issue only begin to scratch the surface of the rich life and theology of John Owen. It is my prayer that in studying the work of this giant of the faith, it will help us be better theologians and exegetes of God's Word. Also, it is my prayer that in thinking through Owen's life and work, we will be more committed to seeing sound theology worked out in our lives and in the church, and it will lead us to a greater proclamation and defense of the truth of the Gospel in our day.