

SBJT Forum

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SBJT: Why has there been a resurgence of interest in John Owen in recent decades?

Nathan A. Finn: I think there are at least three interrelated reasons that we have witnessed renewed interest in John Owen in recent decades. The first reason is the general resurgence of interest in Calvinism and related topics. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, many evangelicals in the English-speaking world “rediscovered” the Reformation and the Puritans, often in response to what many perceived to be a doctrinally vacuous, anthropocentric revivalism. Meetings such as the annual Puritan Conference in London and publishers such as Banner of Truth played a key role in promoting this resurgence in its early decades.

Midcentury interest in the Reformed tradition was a form of what John Webster and others have called “retrieval theology,” because it was engaging with past theological voices for the sake of contemporary doctrinal renewal. As pastors and other ministry leaders developed an interest in the history of Calvinistic thought, it is only natural that they would discover John Owen’s works. He was arguably the most prolific theologian within the English Puritan tradition. Owen was also a key English voice within the broader theological movement called Reformed Scholasticism or Reformed Orthodoxy, which was an attempt to systematize Calvinistic thought in the generations following the Reformation proper.

The second reason, which is in some respects a case study within the broader Calvinistic resurgence, is the influence of J. I. Packer. When Packer was a student at Oxford during World War II, he was quite taken by a Keswick understanding

of spirituality. As Packer gradually found the Higher Life spirituality be increasingly stultifying, he discovered the Puritans, among whom he found a more biblical approach to the Christian life. Packer became a regular speaker at the Puritan Conference, often reading papers related to Owen's life and thought. He also wrote introductions to Banner of Truth reprints of Owen's *Mortification of Sin* and *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. Packer's introduction to the latter volume has become something of a classic in Reformed circles. I have no doubt that far more people have read Packer on Owen and the atonement than have actually read Owen's actual treatise on the work of Christ.

The final reason is in some ways a further extension of the aforementioned reasons. In 1994, John Piper gave a biographical address on Owen at the annual Bethlehem Conference for Pastors. Piper was a rising star among many evangelicals, having by that time authored influential books such as *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (1986) and *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God* (1991). His talk on Owen became widely available on the internet and was later published as part of the book *Contending for Our All: Treasuring Christ in the Lives of Athanasius, John Owen, and J. Gresham Machen* (2006).

I believe Piper helped to "mainstream" John Owen among the generation of evangelicals that came of age in the 1990s and early 2000s. Many of these younger evangelicals were more Calvinistic than the generation that came before them; they were the same folks whom Collin Hansen would later call "Young, Restless, and Reformed." Today, John Owen has become almost as well-known as Jonathan Edwards—another theologian whom Piper (and Packer) helped to popularize among evangelicals.

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SBJT: According to John Owen, What is the Key to the *Mortification of Sin*?

Ryan M. McGraw: Many people are interested in John Owen's teaching on the *Mortification of Sin*. For some, this is virtually the only book that they associate with Owen's name. In this author's opinion, while this is an excellent book, it is not one of Owen's

best. His writings on Christ, the Trinity, and the Spirit in volumes 1-4 of his *Works* are likely his greatest and most useful writings, excepting the volumes on *Hebrews*.

Yet the reason why so many Christians likely turn to the *Mortification of Sin* above Owen's other books is because it strikes a nerve with them. They recognize that killing indwelling sin is both difficult and necessary and they want practical helps to make progress in doing it. However, this can create a bias in readers to find what they expect to see in the *Mortification of Sin* rather than what Owen has to offer them. Many read this book looking for practical rules regarding how to change their practices. While Owen gives such rules, it is easy to miss is how they operate in relation to Christian faith and practice. According to Owen, the key ingredient to mortifying sin is exercising faith in Christ in dependence on the Holy Spirit. This is precisely what makes his teaching so potentially valuable to the church today. We can better appreciate and learn from Owen's teaching on mortifying sin by answering three additional questions: What is the purpose of the *Mortification of Sin*? Why is it misunderstood? And, What is its true value?

First, what is the purpose of the *Mortification of Sin*? The purpose of the *Mortification of Sin* is to develop what might be called the negative side of sanctification. Expounding Romans 8:11-13, Owen explained that mortifying sin was possible for believers alone, since Christ broke sin's power over them through their union with himself by faith, which happened in their effectual calling. Since the Spirit is the author of mortifying sin, he alone can bless the divinely required means of putting sin to death. Those who do not mortify sin shall die, and those who by the Spirit put to death the deeds of the flesh shall live. Mortification is the duty of all believers for all of their lives (chapters 1-4). Before identifying signs of particular unmortified lusts in believers, Owen described what mortification is not and what it is (chapters 5-6). While mortifying sin is a vital work for Christians, it is an incomplete work. As believers are united to Christ through faith they are justified and adopted. In the lifelong process of sanctification, they must kill sin on the one hand (mortification) so that they can walk in new obedience on the other (vivification). Two mistakes that we can make in reading this book, then, are to treat killing sin as an end in itself and to forget that union with Christ through faith by the Spirit's power alone makes mortification possible. The purpose of the *Mortification of Sin* is to promote the negative side of sanctification, in union with Christ, by

the Spirit's power, in order to pave way for the positive side of sanctification.

Second, why is the *Mortification of Sin* often misunderstood? I heard one well-known Owen scholar say that in order to grasp Owen's teaching on mortification, people should read it alongside his Christological treatises in volume one of his *Works*. This is good advice in that Owen's writings on Christ represent some of his best material. However, it is misleading since it implies a defective Christology in the *Mortification of Sin*. Chapters 7-13 of this book provide nine rules for mortifying sin. Two things are particularly noteworthy about this list. First, in contrast to many modern approaches to indwelling sin in believers, rule six out of nine alone treats changing outward circumstances. For Owen (following Christ), fighting against sin must work from the inside out rather than from the outside in. Second, these nine rules were "preparatory" only for mortifying sin (*Works*, 6:78). While many read the mortification of sin to find precisely the kind of ninefold-list presented in these chapters, Owen reminded his readers that though such things were necessary to mortification, we should not mistake them for mortification. The *Mortification of Sin* is sometimes misunderstood in that, according to Owen, the true work of mortification lies in Christology and Pneumatology.

Third, what is the true value of the *Mortification of Sin*? According to Owen, mortifying sin involves the habitual weakening of sin, constant fighting against it, and frequent success in practice (chapter 6). Christians cannot make progress against sin merely by changing their outward behavior or circumstances. Instead, we mortify sin through the Spirit changing our hearts in communion with Christ. In contrast to many modern approaches, this entails more than contemplating our justification. It involves actively drawing power from Christ by faith in relation to every action and every part of the Christian life. This reminds us in passing that it is neither wise nor profitable to judge an author's emphases by the amount of space that he dedicates to some issues in proportion to others. In Owen's case, chapter 14 of the *Mortification of Sin* brought his entire teaching to its climactic application. The true value of this book is that Owen demonstrates that mortification takes place primarily through exercising faith in Christ through the Spirit's power.

In short, the reason why Owen's book on mortification remains helpful to believers today is that he treated mortification as an act of communion with Christ by the Spirit. This prevents the mortification of sin from devolving into a Christian version of a twelve-step program into a transformative act of

communion with the triune God. It also recognizing the necessity of using means in mortifying sin while placing these means in an evangelical context.

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concerning his own *particular interest* in forgiveness. A man may, many do, believe it for themselves, so as not only to have the benefit of it but the comfort also.”

The attainability of assurance must be understood in relationship to faith, however. Owen unreservedly supported an organic relationship between faith and assurance but no confusion between the two. He believed faith included persuasion of the availability of divine forgiveness, but said that did not necessarily include the personal application of forgiveness—which alone gives rise to full assurance. He wrote, “There is or may be a saving persuasion or discovery of forgiveness in God, where there is no assurance of any particular interest therein.”

Second, like the Westminster Confession, *Owen regarded assurance as normative though not necessarily common*. That was consistent with the Confession’s teaching that there are degrees and various kinds of assurance. All true believers possess some assurance, but few can claim the blessing of “full

SBJT: What did John Owen teach on the Christian having a proper assurance of faith?

Joel R. Beeke: John Owen’s (1616–1683) views on assurance of faith have largely been neglected due in part to his never writing a separate treatise on this important subject. His most thorough exposition of assurance is in his *Psalm CXXX*. This can best be understood as an augmentation of the Westminster Confession’s teaching on assurance, while remaining within its framework. Let us think about what Owen teaches on this important subject in four steps.

First, *Owen plainly asserted the attainability of assurance*. He wrote: “There may be a gracious persuasion and assurance of faith in a man con-

assurance.” Owen wrote, “*This discovery of forgiveness in God is great, holy, and mysterious, and which very few on gospel grounds do attain unto. . . Even one experimental embracement of it [i.e., the full assurance of personal interest in divine forgiveness], even at the hour of death, doth well deserve the waiting and obedience of the whole course of a man’s life.*”

Believers who gain full assurance of forgiveness by God do not find it quickly or easily. Those who do not understand that can substitute a notion of forgiveness in God for personal forgiveness from God.

Owen also believed that believers with full assurance were never safe from attacks on their faith. Still, even when a believer is spiritually “cast down,” assurance is not altogether lost (Psalm 42); rather, assurance may continue even under a deep sense of indwelling sin and infirmity. Owen wrote: “A man’s assurance may be as good, as true, when he lies on the earth with a sense of sin, as when he is carried up to the third heaven with a sense of love and foretaste of glory.”

Here Owen not only confirmed but went beyond section 18.4 of the Westminster Confession. For Owen, conviction of sin and assurance of salvation were not antagonistic. Rather, both should be sought, and both are given and retained by God’s grace. Though full assurance is difficult to obtain, true believers must strive for it. As Owen wrote: “*It is the duty of every believer to labour after an assurance of a personal interest in forgiveness, and to be diligent in the cherishing and preservation of it when it is attained . . . It is no small evil in believers not to be pressing after perfection in believing and obedience.*”

The Christian need not despair if he comes short of reaching such assurance, for God may have wise reasons for withholding it from him. Despite God’s wisdom and sovereignty, however, lack of assurance is ordinarily due to the believer’s shortcomings. As Owen wrote: “*In ordinary dispensations of God towards us, and dealings with us, it is mostly our own negligence and sloth that we come short of this assurance . . . Considering what promises are made unto us, what encouragements are given us, what love and tenderness there is in God to receive us, I cannot but conclude that ordinarily the cause of our coming short of this assurance is where I have fixed it.*”

Third, *Owen’s theology on how assurance is obtained* is very much like that of the Westminster Confession, 18.2, which says assurance is obtained through the promises of salvation in Jesus Christ, as well as through inward evidences

of saving grace and the testimony of the Spirit of adoption. Specifically, Owen taught the following on how assurance is obtained:

(1) The primary ground of assurance is the promises of God, specifically the satisfying blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, embraced by faith. Owen wrote: “The soul, by a direct act of faith, believes its own forgiveness, without making inferences of gathering conclusions; and may do so upon the proposition of it to be believed in the promise.”

(2) The primary ground of assurance leads the believer to the secondary grounds, for he who trusts in the objective promises of God in Jesus Christ will yearn to have those promises to be subjectively “testified unto his conscience in a word of promise mixed by faith.” According to Owen, that testimony is one of two secondary grounds of assurance and is based on inward evidences of saving grace. He wrote, “A due spiritual consideration of the causes and effects of regeneration is the ordinary way and means whereby the soul of believers come to be satisfied concerning that work of God in them and upon them.”

(3) In advocating an immediate witness of the Spirit, Owen prevented this experience from becoming too mystical in the following ways. First, he said the Holy Spirit applies his immediate witness through the Word, not beyond the Word. Thus this witness, which is the direct, miraculous, and powerful application of the Word in God’s sovereign time and way, is both Spirit-applied *and* Word-centered. Second, Owen said that the immediate testimony of the Spirit should not be expected or depended upon because of its extraordinary role as a sovereign gift. Moreover, because the Spirit’s immediate testimony is sovereign, no one can say exactly how full assurance should be experienced.

Fourth, in *Psalm CXXX*, Owen nicely showed how a believer may retain, renew, and improve personal assurance of grace. He said that can be done through three activities of faith: “recalling” grace, “waiting on” grace, and fruitful obedience.

The Christian must first seek grace to recall the Spirit’s past, assuring work in order to improve upon his present degree of assurance. Owen indicated that he knew the typical believer seeks such grace far too seldom. Recalling grace may also reveal defects in the believer that thwart assurance.

Next, the Christian must wait for grace in order to renew and improve assurance. As Owen wrote: “*Whatever your condition be, and your*

apprehension of it, yet continue waiting for a better issue, and give not over through weariness or impatience.”

Finally, while recalling and waiting for grace, the Christian must strive for obedience. Indeed, faith and obedience are ultimately inseparable. Said Owen, “The more faith that is true and of the right kind, the more obedience; for all our obedience is the obedience of faith.”

According to Owen, such obedience manifests itself in “the choicest actings of our souls towards God, —as love, delight, rejoicing the Lord, peace, joy, and consolation in ourselves, readiness to do or suffer, cheerfulness in so doing. If they grow not from this root, yet their flourishing wholly depends upon it; so that surely it is the duty of every believer to break through all difficulties in pressing after this particular assurance.” In short, the way to retain and improve assurance is through obedience, which is also the fruit of assurance.

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SBJT: For some evangelicals it is hard to conceive how the incarnation affects the Christian life, but this was not the case with John Owen. Why was this the case?

Matthew Barrett: You are exactly right. For Owen, a robust, orthodox, Reformed Christology does (and should) impact and affect the Christian life. “The person of Christ,” wrote Owen, “is the most glorious and inef-fable effect of divine wisdom, grace, and power” (*The Person of Christ in Works*, 1:44). For Owen, Christ is the “next foundation” of acceptable religion and worship. The first foundation is God the Father. To him is due all worship and honor and glory since

we are his creatures, and he is our Creator. Through the created order God has manifested himself, that is, his “Divine Being, existence, excellencies, and properties” (cf. Rom 1:18–22). However, none of this compares to

his special revelation of himself through his Son, Christ Jesus. Christ is the “foundation of the new creation” and he is “most ineffable and glorious” (*Works*, 1:45). “God was manifested in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16), and he did so for us and our salvation. Christ is the Word who was made flesh in order to dwell among us (John 1:14).

But, asks Owen, “what Word was this?” Owen’s answer is revealing: “That which was in the beginning, which was with God, which was God, by whom all things were made, and without whom was not any thing made that was made; who was light and life. This Word was made flesh, not by any change of his own nature or essence, not by a transubstantiation of the divine nature into the human, not by ceasing to be what he was, but by becoming what he was not, in taking our nature to his own, to be his own, whereby he dwelt among us. This glorious Word, which is God, and described by his eternity and omnipotency in works of creation and providence, ‘was made flesh,’—which expresseth the lowest state and condition of human nature. Without controversy, great is this mystery of godliness!” (*Works*, 1:46-47).

No wonder Isaiah, predicting the coming of this long-awaited Messiah, titles him “Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6) (*Works*, 1:48). Owen also appeals to Heb 1:1-3). For Owen, this is the “glory of the Christian religion—the basis and foundation that bears the whole superstructure” and what sets Christianity apart from every other false religion. The Son of God, taking on our human flesh, becoming a man in order to save us from sin and condemnation, uniting us to himself—this doctrine is certainly the foundation of our entire faith, a foundation that cannot be shaken. Whatever beauty and glory there was in that initial relation between man and God in the garden (Genesis 1–2), “it was all but an obscure representation of the exaltation of our nature in Christ—as the apostle declares, Heb. 2:6–9” (*Works*, 1:48). In our union with Christ we have a far greater union than before. Nothing compares to the union we have with the Son of God who has manifested himself in the flesh through the “subsistence of the divine and human natures in the same single individual person” (*Works*, 1:48).

The beauty of our union becomes even more apparent when we consider humanity’s state after the fall. It is true, says Owen, that there was “true religion in the world after the fall, both before and after the giving of the Law; a religion built upon and resolved into divine revelation.” However, with

the coming of Christ we have something “far more glorious, beautiful, and perfect, than that state of religion was capable of, or could attain” (*Works*, 1:48). Hebrews 1:1–3 and Colossians 2:17 demonstrate Owen’s point. Though God, in times past, spoke through his prophets, in these last days he has spoken directly through his own Son, who is the “brightness of his glory” and through whom our sins are “purged.” While the promise was given through the prophets, it is with the advent of Christ that God fulfills that promise, establishing a new covenant through the blood of his Son.

Therefore, says Owen, “as all the religion that was in the world after the fall was built on the promise of this work of God, in due time to be accomplished; so it is the actual performance of it which is the foundation of the Christian religion, and which gives it the pre-eminence above all that went before it” (*Works*, 1:49). For Owen, should we take away Christ—both who he is and what he has accomplished—we “despoil the Christian religion of all its glory” (*Works*, 1:49).

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