

The Trinitarian Devotion *of* JOHN OWEN

Sinclair B. Ferguson

A LONG LINE *of* GODLY MEN



“Some of us who fell in love with John Owen’s writings did so, to some significant measure, because of the enthusiastic endorsement given by Sinclair Ferguson. For me, after more than thirty-five years of gospel ministry, it would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of Owen’s theological and pastoral insights. But we have long been in need of an updated biography—not simply one that narrates the significant details of his life, but one that analyzes the contours of his theological insights and how they shaped and defined him. And no one is better placed to do that than Sinclair Ferguson. I suspect that many of us, when engaging in word-association, provide the name ‘Ferguson’ when ‘John Owen’ is mentioned.

“I cannot overstate the importance of this volume. I fully expect it to become a best-seller among those who appreciate Owen—and deservedly so.”

—DR. DEREK W.H. THOMAS

Senior minister, First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, S.C.

“This is now the prime book I will be recommending on John Owen. I am very impressed, but not surprised: Sinclair Ferguson has so imbibed the spirit of Owen that he conveys the thought and heart of the great man with limpid clarity. This means that this book is far more than an introduction to Owen; it is at the same time a rich and deeply affecting meditation on communion with our glorious, triune God. Here is a feast of angel’s food.”

—DR. MICHAEL REEVES

President and professor of theology
Union School of Theology, Bridgend, Wales

“Let me begin by echoing Sinclair Ferguson’s own story: John Owen, more than any other theologian of the past, has profoundly shaped my vision of the triune God and what it means to live in the wonder of the gospel. In this delightful little book, Ferguson offers a sort of expert paraphrase and appreciation of Owen’s classic volume *Communion with God*. Along the way, he gives us a great gift: in your hands is now a beautifully accessible tour of Owen’s approach to the spiritual life, by which he means a life secure in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the strong fellowship of the Spirit. Read, savor, and be refreshed, for neither Owen nor Ferguson will disappoint.”

—DR. KELLY M. KAPIC

Professor of theological studies
Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, Ga.

“Reading this book is like listening in on a conversation between one of the most trusted voices from the past and one of the most trusted voices in the present. In fact, that’s exactly what this book is. And as you listen in, you will hear the arc of the conversation bend in one constant direction. You will hear these two voices remind you of the glorious truth that the Christian life is communion with the Triune God.”

—DR. STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

President, Reformation Bible College
Sanford, Fla.

The Trinitarian Devotion of
John Owen

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Series editor, Steven J. Lawson

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SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON



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To
Alistair Begg

ὁ ἀγαπητὸς ἀδελφὸς
καὶ πιστὸς διάκονος
καὶ σύνδουλος ἐν κυρίῳ
—Colossians 4:7

Contents

Foreword: Followers Worthy to Be Followed	xi
Preface: The Christian's Greatest Privilege	xv
1 Pastor and Theologian	1
2 In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit	23
3 Communion with the Father	39
4 Communion with the Son	55
5 Communion with the Holy Spirit	89
Conclusion: Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost	113
Bibliography	117
Scripture Index	121
Subject Index	123
About the Author	129

Foreword

Followers Worthy to Be Followed

Down through the centuries, God has raised up a long line of godly men whom He has mightily used at strategic moments in church history. These valiant individuals have come from all walks of life, from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen's shops. They have arisen from all points of this world, from highly visible venues in densely populated cities to obscure hamlets in remote places. Yet despite these differences, these pivotal figures have had much in common.

Each man possessed an unwavering faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, but more than that, each of these stalwarts of the faith held deep convictions in the God-exalting truths known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they nevertheless stood shoulder to shoulder in championing these biblical teachings that magnify the sovereign grace of God in salvation. These spiritual leaders upheld the foundational truth that "salvation is of the Lord."¹

Any survey of church history reveals that those who have embraced these Reformed truths have been granted extraordinary

1 Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9.

confidence in their God. Far from paralyzing these spiritual giants, the doctrines of grace kindled within their hearts a reverential awe for God that humbled their souls before His throne. The truths of divine sovereignty emboldened these men to rise up and advance the cause of Christ on the earth. With an enlarged vision for the expansion of His kingdom upon the earth, they stepped forward boldly to accomplish the work of ten, even twenty men. They arose with wings like eagles and soared over their times. The doctrines of grace empowered them to serve God in their divinely appointed hour of history, leaving a godly inheritance for future generations.

This Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series highlights key figures in the agelong procession of these sovereign-grace men. The purpose of this series is to explore how these figures used their God-given gifts and abilities to impact their times and further the kingdom of heaven. Because they were wholly devoted followers of Christ, their examples are worthy of emulation today.

This volume, written by my good friend Sinclair Ferguson, focuses upon the man regarded as the greatest of the English Puritan theologians, John Owen. The monumental life of Owen was marked by his superior intellectual achievement. He became a pastor, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, and vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford. His most influential work, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647), written when Owen was only thirty-one years old, is an extended reflection on the intra-Trinitarian life of God in the incarnation and atonement of Jesus Christ. This seminal volume launched Owen on a path of Trinitarian meditation and reflection. He left behind rich treatises and sermons on the Trinitarian communion that a Christian can enjoy with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Perhaps no other English theologian has spent more time in

contemplation of the eternal Godhead, and Owen's study translated into a zealous passion for the gospel and devotion to Christ. John Owen stands as a towering figure, eminently worthy to be profiled in this series.

May the Lord use this book to raise up a new generation of believers who will bring the gospel message to bear upon this world. Through this profile, may you be strengthened to walk in a manner worthy of your calling. May you be zealous in your devotion to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for the glory of His name and advance of His kingdom.

Soli Deo gloria!

—Steven J. Lawson
Series editor

Preface

The Christian's Greatest Privilege

I am grateful to my friend Steve Lawson for his invitation to contribute to the Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series, which he both devised and continues to edit. *Invitation* is probably too weak a word to describe his desire that this excellent series contain a volume on John Owen. I suspect he knew that, for me, writing on Owen would be something of a personal experience. For his insistence, encouragement, and friendship, I am deeply grateful. Writing *The Trinitarian Devotion of John Owen* has turned me back once more to reflect on the life and ministry of a truly great and godly man, one to whom I owe a huge personal debt.

John Owen lived from 1616 to 1683. Many of his works were published during his lifetime and a number were published soon thereafter. Two different collections of his writings appeared in the nineteenth century. But by the middle of the twentieth century, both his name and his books had fallen into virtual obscurity.

In the providence of God, Owen's *Works* began to be republished in 1965.¹ At that time, I had just turned seventeen and was in my first year at university. My tuition fees, all living expenses, and more were covered by scholarships and—happy days—there was even money left over to buy books. Slightly damaged copies of the massive volumes of Owen's *Works* (they average around six hundred pages each) could be purchased for the equivalent of a dollar or so each. I bought them one by one, sometimes two by two, until I owned a complete set.

And I began to read.

Owen's style is usually regarded as notoriously difficult. Latin was virtually his first language. His education was in Latin; he lectured in Latin; he wrote in Latin. He probably dreamed in Latin. Not surprisingly, his English style is heavily Latinate.

Yet, as I have been writing this book, it has dawned on me that God's providence had already prepared me to keep reading. As I stood on the verge of a university education, I felt very unsure of what to expect, or whether a degree was even within my intellectual power to attain. No one in my family line, as far as I knew, had ever gone to university. In those days, places were scarce. For my parents, who had both left school in their very early teens, university studies would have been beyond their wildest aspirations. But they were deeply committed to encouraging their sons to understand the importance of education. There was no discussion, as far as I can remember, about whether we would study Latin. It was a key

1 The Banner of Truth Trust republished Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* in 1959 and then from 1965 to 1968 reprinted the 1850–53 edition of his complete works edited by W.H. Goold, with the exception of his Latin writings. In 1991, the Trust then reprinted Owen's massive commentary on Hebrews, which had been published in the Goold edition in 1854–55.

to further education, and therefore nonnegotiable. Little could my father and mother have imagined that the guidance they gave their eleven-year-old son would make it much easier for him, some six years later, to read the greatest, if possibly the most difficult, of all the seventeenth-century English theologians.

And so I kept reading. Of course, some of Owen's works were of greater interest to me than others. But then, some of them contained material that had probably first been preached to college students my own age. Owen stretched my mind, analyzed my soul, taught me theological devotion, and prescribed spiritual medicine. Theologically and pastorally, he helped shape what I thought a minister of the gospel should know, believe, and preach. He showed me how to think through the gospel and its application.

Owen's assistant, David Clarkson (no mean theologian himself), said in his funeral sermon, "I need not tell you of this who knew him, that it was his great design to promote holiness in the life and exercise of it among you."² Just as Owen's writings had done that for others, so they did it for me, encouraging me to think and live for the glory of God.

Thus, this seventeenth-century Oxford academic and minister has been one of the most significant influences on my life. I am profoundly grateful for him—and for the way he used his gifts for the church of Christ in the stressful days in which he lived. He surely never could have dreamed that, three centuries after his death, his work would nourish a teenage boy who hoped to follow his example and become a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

2 *The Works of John Owen*, ed. Thomas Russell, 21 vols. (London: Robert Baynes, 1826), 1:420.

So—although it may not be immediately apparent to readers of the pages that follow—Dr. Lawson was right in thinking that this little book would mean something quite personal to me. For it gives me the privilege of introducing Owen to some who may never have heard his name, much less read his works. In particular, it provides an opportunity to say something about the enormous importance and relevance of a central theme in his theology. This theme can, I think, be summed up in the following way.

There is nothing in all the world more important to you than these truths:

(1) God is Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a great mystery—because we are not God and we cannot fully understand the sheer, wonderful, glorious mystery of His being. But we can begin to grasp it, and learn to love and adore Him.

(2) If you are a Christian, it is because of the loving thought and action of each person of the Trinity. The Father, along with the Son and the Spirit, planned it before the foundation of the world; the Son came to pay the price for your redemption and, supported by the Holy Spirit, became obedient to His Father in your place, both in His life and death, to bring you justification before God; and now, by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit sent by both the Father and the Son, you have been brought to faith.

(3) The greatest privilege any of us can have is this: we can know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We can enjoy fellowship—what Owen calls “communion”—with God. This knowledge is as rich, wide, deep, long, and high as are the three persons of God. Knowing

THE CHRISTIAN'S GREATEST PRIVILEGE

Him and having fellowship with Him is an entire world of endless knowledge, trust, love, joy, fellowship, pleasure, and satisfaction.

This is what John Owen wanted Christians to know.

The Trinitarian Devotion of John Owen is only a beginning point in explaining what all this means. But I hope it will be a beginning without an ending.

Every author is a debtor. In addition to my debt to Steve Lawson for his invitation, I am grateful to the wonderful staff of Ligonier Ministries and Reformation Trust for their encouragement and support. In a special way, I want to express my thanks to my wife, Dorothy. We met the same year I first met *The Works of John Owen*. Wherever we have gone, Owen has come with us. I have often seen in her what Owen taught about the Christian's "returns" to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in a life lived in practical devotion to Him. It is from within this context of her faithfulness to me and her love for our family that these pages come. I pray that they might stimulate in you a richer experience of the Trinitarian devotion that John Owen both tasted and taught.

—Sinclair B. Ferguson
Carnoustie, Scotland
March 2014

Pastor and Theologian

*A pastor, a scholar, a divine of the first magnitude; holiness gave a divine luster to his other accomplishments, it shined in his whole course, and was diffused through his whole conversation.*¹

—DAVID CLARKSON, FUNERAL SERMON FOR JOHN OWEN,

SEPTEMBER 4, 1683

The year of his birth—1616—was the year of William Shakespeare's death.

When he was only thirty-three years old, he preached before the English Parliament. It was not for the first time, but on this occasion, King Charles I had been publicly executed less than twenty-four hours before.

At the age of thirty-six, he was appointed to be vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford (in American terms, the president) by the English general and future Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell.

1 Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1971), p. 173.

In 1662, along with around two thousand other ministers, he was ejected from the Church of England for refusing to conform to the use of the Book of Common Prayer in church services.

Thereafter, under the threat of arrest, he served as the pastor of Nonconformist congregations. During the last period of his life, he pastored a congregation in London.

He died in 1683, leaving behind him a legacy of writings that now occupy twenty-four large volumes averaging around six hundred pages each.

His name was John Owen. In his own time, he was England's greatest living theologian. Now, more than three hundred years after his death, many still regard him as such. But who was he?

Early Life

John Owen was born in Stadham (now Stadhampton), about ten miles southeast of Oxford. His father, Henry, was the minister of the local congregation.² He had an older brother, William (who also became a minister³), and two younger brothers, Henry (who entered the military) and Philemon (who was killed while on military duty in Ireland in 1649), and a sister whose name is unknown.⁴

The Owens were a Puritan family. "I was bred up from my infancy under the care of my father," Owen wrote, "who was a Nonconformist

2 Owen Sr. later became minister at Harpsden, and he died there on September 18, 1649. He is buried in the chancel of the church.

3 William was minister in Ewelme in Oxfordshire and died in 1660 at age forty-eight.

4 She married John Hartcliffe, minister of Harding in Oxfordshire and later canon of Windsor. He died in 1702.

all his days, and a painful [hard-working] labourer in the vineyard of the Lord.”⁵

Scholars have long debated what constitutes a “Puritan.” The term describes a wide variety of individuals, ranging from Anglicans who simply wanted to see the Church of England purified from some of its unbiblical features to individuals who, in their opposition to the Church of England, stood on the margins of Christian orthodoxy. Henry Owen, as his son John would later do, stood in the mainstream of biblical orthodoxy and was perhaps concerned only to see biblical guidelines followed in the worship and governance of the church. In any event, he was a faithful gospel minister and father. As Calvin said of Timothy, so we could say of Owen: he “sucked in godliness with his mother’s milk.”⁶

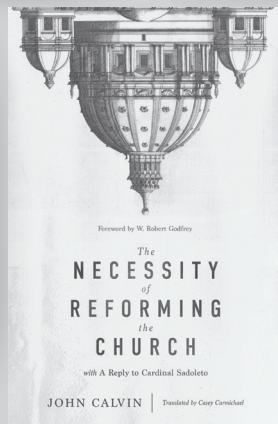
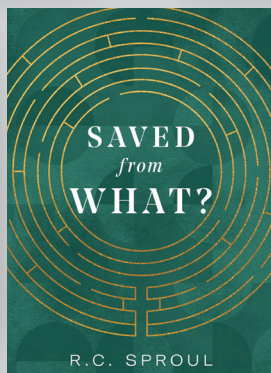
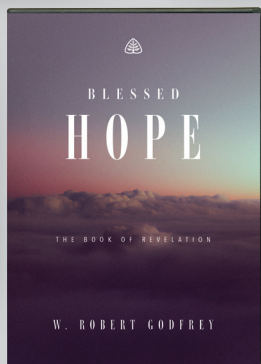
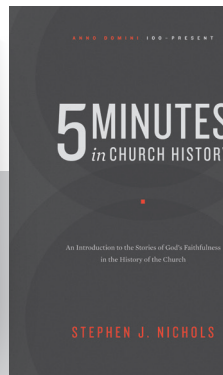
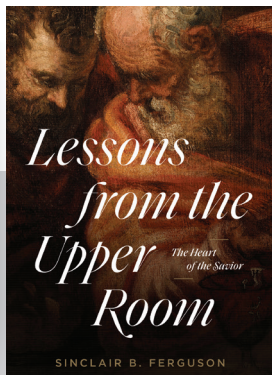
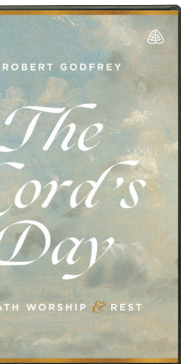
Having received his early education from his father, when he was around ten years old, thanks to a generous uncle, both he and his elder brother, William, were sent to a small school in Oxford to prepare for entry to Queen’s College in Oxford University.

Students at Oxford in the seventeenth century were by and large either gentlemen or scholars, but rarely both. In many ways, the university served as a kind of educational finishing school for the upper classes, many of whom would neither take exams nor graduate. Owen, however, entered the university with a view to study, and he graduated with a bachelor of arts alongside his brother in 1632, at

5 *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W.H. Goold, 24 vols. (Edinburgh, Scotland: 1850–53; repr. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 13:224. Subsequent citations of Owen’s *Works* refer to this edition.

6 John Calvin, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ed. D.W. and T.F. Torrance, trans. T.A. Smail (Edinburgh, Scotland: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), p. 292.

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