

John Owen (1616-1683)

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I start by recommending a new book by John Piper: *Contending for Our All: Defending and Treasuring Christ in the Lives of Athanasius, John Owen and J. Gresham Machen* (IVP). The introduction is worth the purchase price: its theme is that the truth has to be held, proclaimed and contended for by every generation, which calls for us to be engaged in sacred controversy (Jude 3). The title of the essay on Owen indicates its theme: “How John Owen killed his own sin while contending for truth.”

Owen, born in 1616, was a son of the manse. He states of his father, a pastor in a village near Oxford, “I was bred up from my infancy under the care of my father, who was a nonconformist all his days, and a painful labourer in the vineyard of the Lord.” At the age of 10 he went to the grammar school in Oxford, prepared for university life and entered Queen’s College at the age of 12. At 16, he took his BA, and at 19, his MA. Peter Toon, in *God’s Statesman* says of young Owen: “He often allowed himself only four hours of sleep each night. His health was affected, and in later life, when he was often on a sick-bed, he regretted these hours of rest that he had missed as a youth.”

Born in the middle of the Puritan movement, Owen became its greatest advocate. John Piper speaks of five events which shaped his life.

First: the Civil War beginning in 1642 – the next four years would not only determine the outcome of the conflict, but events in Owen’s life impressed the rest of that life. One Lord’s Day in 1642 he and his cousin went to hear Edmund Calamy, but he was incapacitated and his place taken by a country preacher. His text was Matt. 8:26. “Why are ye faithful, O ye of little faith?” It was the enactment of God’s word and time to bring peace to Owen’s soul with the assurance that he was born again by the Holy Spirit.

Second: in 1644 Owen married Mary Rooke and their marriage lasted for 31 years until her death in 1675. Ten of their eleven children died in infancy, with only one daughter surviving and living into young adulthood. Owen buried his whole family.

Third: in April 1643, his first book was published, *A Display of Arminianism*, in which he saw how crucial it was to combat the English High Church's repudiation of predestination.

Fourth: in July 1643, he became pastor of Fordham in Essex. Although he was not long in the post it did confirm the direction of his life, so that in everything he maintained a pastoral heart.

Fifth: in 1646, Owen received an invitation to preach before Parliament. For the next 14 years he was engaged in the religious and political life of our nation.

Coming to the notice of Oliver Cromwell, he became his chaplain, and then in 1651, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, and a year later Vice-Chancellor of the University, posts he held until the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660. He also pastored a Congregational fellowship within the Cathedral, having moved from a Presbyterian view after reading John Cotton's *Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven*. During this period he studied and wrote prolifically. After 1660 until his death in 1683, he lived an almost nomadic existence, as did most of the Puritans.

He was an advocate of toleration at a time of heavy handedness by the state, including trying unsuccessfully to have Bunyan released from prison and encouraging those nonconformists who had been forced out of the Church of England in 1662. He strove for personal holiness in himself and others, especially the political establishment. He and Bunyan are buried together in Bunhill fields. In his funeral address, David Clarkson said: "A great light has fallen; one of eminency for holiness, learning, parts and abilities; a pastor, a scholar, a divine of the first magnitude; holiness gave a divine lustre to his other accomplishments, it shined in his whole course, and was diffused through his whole conversation."

(Published in the series, 'Congregational Worthies' in *Congregational Concern*, Magazine of the EFCC. Used with permission)