

## INTRODUCTION

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You are holding in your hand probably one of the most important books you could ever read.

That may seem an astonishing claim to make for a work that is now well over three hundred years old. Not least since sixty years ago you might have been a graduate in theology and yet not known such a book existed or recognized the name of the author. Thankfully this is no longer true.

Even so, how can such a claim—‘probably one of the most important books you could ever read’—possibly be made for an old, not to say antiquarian book on Jesus Christ? Is this ‘publisher-speak’?

A moment’s reflection and some self-catechetical questions may point you in the direction of an answer.

- Q 1 Can I remember when I last read a substantial book on the Person of Jesus Christ?
- Q 2 Can I name three or four really great books about Christ written during my lifetime, or in the past hundred years?

Perhaps you can. But if so you are almost certainly in the minority—

and not necessarily because you lack knowledge or read little. For despite the fact that Christ-centredness has been understood to be a hallmark of evangelical Christianity (and indeed in recent years has become almost a ‘buzz-word’) it has not led to a multitude of outstanding books about the Person of Christ.

The judgment of charity would suggest that this is not due to a conspiracy of silence among publishers and authors, but simply that it has been assumed that evangelical Christianity is Christ-centred and suffused with a real and deep familiarity with him and what the Scriptures teach about him. After all, such exhortations as ‘Consider Jesus’ and ‘let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus’ (Heb. 3:1; 11:1–2, ESV) must be among the most commonly heard words in Sunday Schools, Bible Classes and in sermons.

So what is the problem?

The presenting symptom is that most of us find these exhortations difficult to put into practice for any length of time. Indeed, honesty might lead us to confess that we find it much easier to ‘*consider*’ the sports, or music, or hobby that we enjoy; and as for ‘*looking to*’ someone, we find our minds and affections more easily captured by others than by the Lord Jesus.

This, however, simply leads to another question: what is the problem that creates ‘the problem’? It may be manifold, but at its heart lies a lack of knowledge. We cannot sustain either admiration or reflection where there is ignorance of the object.

‘But’ it might be said, ‘surely knowledge of Jesus is *personal* knowledge, not academic, factual, cerebral knowledge?’ True. But *personal* knowledge requires *knowledge* of the person in order to be sustained. So any antithesis between informational knowledge and personal knowledge is poorly grounded. We need to know as much as we possibly can about Jesus Christ if we are to enjoy knowing him as much as we can!

Think of a young man who has recently developed a special friendship with a young woman and ‘fallen in love’. Does he have a problem ‘looking to’ her? Why is it almost redundant to tell him to ‘consider’ her? The instinctive answer may be ‘sight’; but the deeper

answer is ‘knowledge’. Sight may create interest, but on its own it cannot sustain attention unless it is accompanied by knowledge. Here is—from a distance—a beautiful young woman. Get closer and learn more about her attitude, her language, her habits, the way she treats others. Knowledge may now feed attraction; on the other hand it may dispel it! Knowledge and affections go hand in glove.

Personal knowledge of Christ similarly requires knowledge and understanding in order to develop into ongoing love for him. Indeed by its very nature it desires more and more knowledge.

We could here paraphrase the famous phrase of Anselm of Canterbury: *Fides quaerens intellectum* (‘faith always seeks understanding’): love also seeks understanding. We cannot love what we do not know. To be able to admire Jesus Christ with the love of faith requires a growing understanding of who he is and what he has done for us.

#### OWEN’S TEACHING

The genius of John Owen lay in his ability to combine profound theological understanding with deep pastoral and personal insight. Like many of his works, *The Person of Christ* is designed to help us grow in knowledge *in order that we may grow in faith and hope and love*. Thus as a patient and prayerful reading of it fills the mind with fresh understanding, the will is drawn to a deeper devotion to him, and the affections are filled with a deeper joy in him. This is theology (or, to be more precise, Christology) of the best and richest kind. It breathes the atmosphere of an author who loved the Scriptures, and both knew and appreciated the writings of the early fathers of the church who wanted to describe Christ biblically and accurately not because they were academics but because they were, to coin a term, Christophileans—lovers of Christ. Should a Christian have less zeal for a true and full description of the Saviour, Lord and God than a young man has for the girl he loves, or a married man for his wife?

Once we grasp the real nature of personal knowledge of Christ, not only does the rationale behind Owen’s book make sense, but

we will appreciate every page of it. For his stated goal is to reach the heart and conscience by instructing the mind: ‘The re-enthroning of the Person, Spirit, Grace, and Authority of Christ, in the hearts and consciences of men.’<sup>1</sup> Owen well grasped Paul’s principle that it is through the renewal of the mind that the transformation of our lives is effected.<sup>2</sup>

A minister who had read an earlier volume of the Christian Focus editions of Owen once contacted me to ask if there were any more books in print like it. It is therefore quite possible that some readers will be unfamiliar not only with this particular title but also know little of its author. It may be helpful, therefore, to introduce John Owen himself, and to set the context for *The Person of Christ*.

#### JOHN OWEN—A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY LIFE

John Owen was born at Stadhampton, near Oxford, in 1616, the second son of Henry Owen, the local vicar. Educated first in a small grammar school, his immense intellectual ability must have been apparent early in his life. He entered the University of Oxford at the age of twelve and graduated with a BA in 1632 (aged either 15 or 16!). A lifetime later would see him bequeath to the church materials which now fill twenty four volumes each around 600 pages in length. We are rightly awestruck by how this was possible—not least considering the poverty of writing materials in bygone generations.

Life was not all study for Owen. In his teens he threw the javelin and he enjoyed playing the lute. Nevertheless, towards the end of his life he lamented that elements of his ill health were the result of the indifference he had shown to his physical well-being in earlier days—in particular deliberately depriving himself of sleep to permit more time for study (plus his College day began with a Latin sermon at 6.00 a.m.!). There can be little doubt that in his youth he was driven to pursue great learning—a pursuit in which he obviously enjoyed considerable success.

<sup>1</sup> From Owen’s Preface in this edition, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:1-2.

Owen later became a master scholar, writing and lecturing in Latin as well as English, commanding encyclopedic learning in a variety of theological disciplines. He was a consummate intellectual, but by no means an ‘ivory-tower theologian’. As was said of John Calvin before him, he became a theologian in order to be a better pastor. Throughout his writings it is clear that the heartbeat of his life was not ultimately the pursuit of learning for its own sake but a desire to love and serve Jesus Christ.

We know relatively little of an intimate nature about Owen’s personal life and habits. Like many of his Puritan contemporaries he may have kept a personal journal—but if so, like them, he also insisted on its destruction at the time of his death. Only occasionally, even in his correspondence, are we given an insight into his domestic life. But occasionally his biographers are able to give us a glimpse of the inner workings of his soul.

Born and reared in an English vicarage with deep Puritan sympathies, Owen knew the gospel from his infancy. But although he must have ‘drunk in godliness with their mother’s milk’ (as John Calvin once aptly wrote of Timothy), his own faith flourished only after a period of some personal struggle.

Following his student days in Oxford and a period serving as a domestic chaplain, Owen moved to London in 1642. An early biography suggests that for several years he had struggled with melancholy and lacked a sense of assurance of his own salvation. But soon after his arrival in the capital he was to have an experience that would leave its mark on the rest of his life.

Accompanied by a cousin, Owen went one Sunday to St Mary’s, Aldermanbury to hear the famous Edmund Calamy (1600-1666), only to be disappointed that a substitute was to occupy the pulpit. Yet, in the providence of God, the anonymous preacher’s sermon, on the words of Jesus, ‘Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith’ (Matthew 8:26 Geneva Bible), were the means of bringing Owen to a settled assurance of faith.

During the years that followed Owen gradually rose to public prominence in both ecclesiastical and national life. But prominence does not protect us from trials or sorrows. While he enjoyed

31 years of marriage to Mary Rooke, and together they had eleven children, only one of them survived into adult life. Both personally and politically he knew high points and low points.

Called to the ministry he served parishes at Fordham in Essex and later at Coggeshall. He was only thirty years old when he first preached before Parliament. Later, still only thirty two, in January 1649 he was appointed to preach before Parliament on the day following the execution of King Charles I (which he may well have witnessed. It was not long before he was on relatively intimate terms with some of the most significant figures in the body-politic, including Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Protector (whose granddaughter would later in the 1670s be a member of his London congregation). In 1651 he was appointed Dean of Christ Church, Oxford and in 1652 Vice-Chancellor of the University (in American terms, the President).

The heady days of the Cromwellian period passed within the decade. By that time, however, Owen's star was already on the wane, since in 1657 he had opposed moves to make Cromwell king.

Owen was, of course, a nonconformist. Following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and the Act of Uniformity in 1662 his service was largely of an unofficial nature, writing and ministering privately (congregations would gather in his own residences—in which from time to time he experienced government raids!). Only in the last decade or so of his life was it possible for ministers with his Puritan convictions to serve churches in a more public way. The forty or so members of the fellowship he cared for united in 1673 with a larger group of more than one hundred worshippers meeting in Leadenhall Street in London. During the next decade another hundred people became members. Thus, towards the end of his life, when strong enough to preach, he ministered to a congregation of perhaps two hundred and fifty members and a number of adherents and visitors. He continued to write and preach in London as his health allowed until his death in 1683 in the then 'quiet village of Ealing'.

Owen was an intellectual, a scholar, an academic leader, a figure moving for a season in the corridors of power. He was a sufficiently

influential figure to have his name linked with various plots—including one to bring down Richard the son and (inefficient) successor of Oliver Cromwell. But Owen had a deeper passion than either political influence or the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. His concern was for the church of Christ and for the life-changing ministry of the word of God. This explains the friendship he cultivated and the help he sought to give to John Bunyan—who clearly belonged educationally and socially to a different sphere. It was Owen who sought to influence his former Oxford tutor Thomas Barlow, now Bishop of Lincoln, to petition for Bunyan's release from prison. Thereafter Bunyan probably preached for Owen's congregation at its meetings in White's Alley in Moorfields whenever he was in London. King Charles II is reported to have asked Owen why he would listen to the preaching of an uneducated tinker like John Bunyan. The learned Doctor responded, 'Could I possess the tinker's abilities for preaching, please your majesty, I would gladly relinquish all my learning.'

In fact Owen was almost certainly one of the very first people ever to read Bunyan's immortal work *The Pilgrim's Progress*. At his suggestion Bunyan took his manuscript to his own publisher, Nathaniel Ponder. The rest, as they say, is history. Ponder—who must have had a special empathy for Bunyan since he himself had been imprisoned earlier in the same year Bunyan brought his manuscript to him—had a best seller on his hands and soon became known as 'Bunyan Ponder'!

These incidents, coupled with his voluminous writings, give us important clues to Owen's deep love for God's people and his devotion to the church. His last assistant David Clarkson underlined this in the funeral sermon he preached following his death:

I need not tell you of this who knew him, that it was his design to promote holiness in the life and exercise of it . . . He was a burning and a shining light, and you for a while rejoiced in his light. Alas! It was but for a while; and we may rejoice in it still.

## CONTEXT

In many ways John Owen held a unique position in the critical third quarter of seventeenth century English political and religious life. His profound learning, his connections to some of the most influential people in the country, the positions he had held in academia combined to make him a force to be reckoned with, or on occasion to seek as a co-belligerent. For that reason a considerable proportion of his writing was devoted to controversial issues. While *The Person of Christ* constitutes one of Owen's substantial works of theology it too needs to be read against the background of a developing crisis for theological orthodoxy.

The crisis had in fact been simmering for a century. While we usually think of the mainstream sixteenth century reformers as engaged in controversy with the Roman Catholic Church they were also fighting a battle on their left flank with a multifaceted and radical movement marked by Arianism<sup>3</sup> and anti-Trinitarianism. John Calvin had unhappy contacts with some of these figures (Michael Servetus being the best known), including Laelius Socinus whom he sought to recover from his tendency to embrace unbiblical teaching. His nephew Fausto Sozzini became a major figure among anti-Trinitarians in Poland in what came to be known as The Minor Church which developed not only an academic institution and a printing house but also published the internationally influential *Racovian Catechism*. This had been translated into English and published in Amsterdam in 1652 by John Biddle (or Bidle, 1615-1662) who must have been a student at Oxford when Owen was still there as a graduate. The Council of State called Owen into service to refute the Socinian teaching. This he did in his *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, published in 1655, and also later in his great series of 'Exercitations' on the Priesthood of Christ prefaced to his massive *Commentary on Hebrews*. Thus by 1679 when Owen published *The Person of Christ* he had already engaged

<sup>3</sup> Arianism is the heresy which denies the full deity of Christ. It is named after Arius (died 336 AD).



in polemics with Socinianism's denial of the deity of Christ and its rejection of the necessity of his priestly ministry in substitutionary atonement.

We rarely hear the term 'Socinianism' today. In its English dress it soon morphed into Deism and Unitarianism in both old and new England—a professed Christianity eviscerated of everything that makes Christianity distinctive. Its father figure was Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1582-1648), the older brother of the great metaphysical poet George Herbert.<sup>4</sup> For him true religion could be summarized as an expression of five building blocks:

1. Belief in the existence of a Supreme Being
2. Worship of this great Being
3. Virtue coupled with piety as the chief elements in that worship
4. Sin expiated by repentance
5. Rewards and punishments in the afterlife.<sup>5</sup>

Owen's world was therefore one in which other figures like Thomas Hobbes were raising questions about the classical view of Scripture (as he did in his *Leviathan*, 1650) so that the Bible was being brought down to the level of other texts. The principles of Deism would slowly take hold in, for example, John Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). Here, influenced by Herbert, Locke maintained that while Christianity transcends reason—the plain man must not be expected to believe anything that does not harmonize with natural religion. In his *Essay on Human Understanding* (published in 1689) he had already argued that reason is to our ultimate court of appeal.

Such Deism would soon find vivid expression in the title of John Toland's book: *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696) and flower

4 Intriguingly Owen had a brief correspondence in 1653 with Lord Herbert's son Richard, the second Baron Cherbury over an unpaid bill for his son who was a student at Christ Church, Oxford when Owen was Dean. Even more intriguingly his letter (which the editor notes is not only 'now badly faded but it is also written in poor English!') is signed 'Your affectionate friend and humble servant' P. Toon, ed., *The Correspondence of John Owen* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1970), 61-2.

5 Herbert had published his influential *De Veritate* in 1624.

## THE PERSON OF CHRIST

in such works as Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as Creation; or, the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (1730). Tindal essentially removed the fall, sin and guilt and the necessity of the atonement. Moderation and acting consistently with one's nature summarized true religion.

Thus the context in which Owen was writing in the late 1670s was one in which the essential elements of the gospel surrounding both the Person and the Work of Christ were under threat. Deism was essentially reductionist, denying supernaturalism and the necessity of redemption—and therefore inevitably the Christ-centredness of the Bible and of the gospel. A new agenda was being set—in which man was becoming the measure of all things, reason autonomous, and the uniqueness of Christ discounted.

Significantly however, although Owen challenges false views of Christ, *The Person of Christ* well illustrates his deep conviction that the best antidote to error is not to be found so much in polemic *per se* as it is in the exposition and application of the truth. And this he does in rich abundance. The result is that these pages transcend the narrow context of late seventeenth century England and continue to instruct us today.

This said, however, we too are living in a time when forms of Socinianism and Deism abound—today, as in Owen's day—sadly also within the professing Christian Church. So there is not only a certain timelessness attached to Owen's positive exposition but also a relevance in his polemics.

## THIS EDITION

This new edition of *The Person of Christ* is now the sixth volume selected from the massive corpus of Owen's *Works* which *Christian Focus* have published under the careful and skilled editorship of Dr Philip Ross. His aim has been to highlight the value of this particular book and to present it in a way that is both attractive and helpful to the modern reader.

Owen himself would surely have approved. For he had a passion not only to defend the truth about Christ against attacks, but to

communicate it to ordinary Christians like ourselves. This was a deeply-held pastoral conviction and commitment. As early as 1645 (when he was a young minister still under thirty years old) he wrote two catechisms for his congregation at Fordham in Essex. While engaging in theology at the highest of seventeenth century levels, he also held the conviction that all theology worth its name has a practical bearing on the Christian life. At the heart of this lies the knowledge of God in Christ. It is simply not possible to know too much about him! And the more and better we know, the greater our trust in him and love for him should grow.

### READING THE PERSON OF CHRIST

Readers who are new to Owen may be glad of a few words of advice about approaching this work.

*The Person of Christ* has an extended Preface. Its history is interesting but also unexpectedly amusing.

Owen originally hoped to write a fully comprehensive study which would have included detailed exposition of the history of theological reflection and debate on the Person of Christ. Realizing this would stretch his work beyond limits he had then decided to provide a more condensed version. But even the great Owen had problems with publishers anxious to recoup their investment as quickly as possible! They had already printed the substance of the book, leaving Owen with both time and space only to provide his readers with some materials he already had to hand. This material he incorporated in the original publication in the form of a Preface.

Unless you are already familiar with Owen, my own suggestion is that you first only glance through this extensive introduction. In it Owen provides a map of the whole, but also numerous citations from classical theologians. Rather than be delayed by names that may be unfamiliar, it may be more helpful to leave them until you have worked your way through the whole book—and then return to them in due course. In fact Dr Ross's carefully laid out Contents pages will prove to be the simplest map for the first time reader.

## THE PERSON OF CHRIST

However you approach this treatise you will meet profound reflections on many aspects of the Person of Christ and his Work.

Some elements of Owen's exposition of biblical truths may be quite new to you. But in all this he has one aim in view—to help you fix your gaze on Jesus Christ in such a way that your heart will be filled with faith and hope in him, and your love and affections will be fixed on him. His goal in writing is that you should feel, with Paul, 'the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.'<sup>6</sup>

If this goal is realized in any measure, then the editor Philip Ross, the Publisher Christian Focus, and I suspect the author John Owen himself will surely be satisfied.

So now, let your reading begin!

*Sinclair B. Ferguson*

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 3:8.