

## John Owen and the "Normal" Christian Life or Sanctification in an Era of Confusion

John D. Hannah

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The lament of recent writers over the deplorable state of theological consciousness in the churches is alarming. David Wells' judgment that evangelicalism (being an expression of the Enlightenment which it so professes to oppose) is on the verge of "losing its character, if not its soul," has a ring of reality in it. <sup>(1)</sup>

Many of the churches in the land seem content with the repetition of heart-warming, inspiring stories and the rehearsal of positive experiences, what is designated as "celebrative worship," with a foreboding absence of doctrinal teaching. Negative, oft-discomforting statements in the Scriptures are glossed over, if not completely avoided, with the result that saints endure elemental pabulum and the unbelievers come away with the impression that Jesus looks remarkably like them! Though touted as a serious Bible-oriented movement, the lack of in-depth doctrinal interest in the churches belies a terrible tragedy. The pastor's role has become that of an amiable good-fellow; the once profound emphasis on character has receded for an emphasis on personality. The result is that the Lord's people have little instruction in the Scriptures; what they may receive is most likely a medley of diverse theological elements that are mutually contradictory and confusing.

Illustrative of the state of biblical teaching in the churches is what passes as instruction in the spiritual life. When presented with the question, "How do you walk with God?", the rejoinder is often confusing, if not distressing. Generally, Christian advice-givers have seen the shallowness of secular approaches to life which deposit the roots of dysfunctional behavior in external forces that involuntarily impact the "victim," and reject self-exertion and "correct" mental thoughts as resolute. For the Christian, at least generally, there is the recognition that we are responsible moral agents, and the solution to aberrance is without, not within. However, Christian counselors, theologians, and pastors have taught a dizzying array of procedures for dealing with behavioral dysfunction. While there is agreement, at least in the broadest of terms, that the fountainhead of all wrong is sin, the depth of the disfiguring effects of it are described with no consensus. And, because there is little agreement as to the human plight or the degree of debilitation, a variety of solutions has been offered. For example, whether it is a Holiness, Keswick, or Charismatic model for the Christian life, the emphasis on faith (i.e., "if you only believe," "simply trust") is often little more than psychological gymnastics. As sometimes presented, victory over sin is a matter of following correct procedures with wholehearted trust; the strength of inward resolve is made the key to progress.

Such schemes promise too much, instantaneously bringing confusion to the tenderhearted realist. Approaches to the spiritual life of these sorts do not take into account the struggle with sin as an ever-enduring process and the result of such shallow ways of thinking results in discouragement for anyone hoping for a quick fix. When methods promise a great deal more than they actually deliver, the net result is not victory over sin, but an even greater sense of guilt and heightened awareness of failure. Theories that do not take into account the ever-present power of sin simply cannot deliver what they promise.

In the preface to an edition of John Owen's works, J. I. Packer recounted his own struggle with the holiness theory of the victorious life and his sense of haunting failure. As a result, he turned to the saving insight of the biblically-oriented wisdom of that master counselor, the chancellor of Oxford University in the seventeenth century, the Puritan divine, John Owen. Packer wrote: "I still think after thirty-five years that Owen did more than anyone else to make me as much of a moral, spiritual, and theological realist as I have so far become . . . .It is not too much to say that God used him to save my sanity." (2) Packer's judgment about the depth of Owen's insights into the spiritual life is quite valid and it is for this reason that a summary of his thoughts is worth presenting. In essence, Owen offers perceptive counsel for the questions we face: What is the fundamental cause of behavioral dysfunction?; What debilitation has resulted from the dysfunction?; and What are the prospects for correction?

### **John Owen and the Human Dilemma**

Every view of the spiritual life has at its starting point an understanding of the human plight in sin. Indeed, a weak view of the latter is at the base of every distortion in the former. Simply put, an inaccurate understanding of the power of sin in the believer's life will lead to distorted expectations of spiritual progress. Three principles emerge from Owen writings that provide insight into the doctrine of the Christian life. First, the grip of sin (what Owen speaks of as the dominion of sin) has been broken; its universal hold on the Christian's life came to an end in the miracle of rebirth. Commenting on Romans 6:14 ("For sin will have no dominion over you . . ."), he argues that the hold of sin both extensively and intensively has been forever abolished. "The dominion of sin is present when sin exercises control over the will of a man with no opposition from another principle" (Works 7:518). While sin, says Owen, remains in the believer, never to be eradicated in this life though immediately in the final resurrection, the believer has experienced the wonderful reality of degrees of victory over sin. To illustrate the point, Owen invokes the image of a forest. Prior to the Lord's mercies in redemption a person's life may be characterized as a dense tangle of trees, vines, and underbrush. The ground is completely covered; there are no clearings and light never penetrates to the soil. Sin, like a dense jungle, completely dominates the entire landscape of one's being: the intellect, emotions, and will. There neither is, nor can be, any virtue in the unbeliever in that his or her entire being is deformed and corrupted.

Second, despite the grip of sin having been broken, the presence of sin in the believer's life remains an ever-present reality. Though the Bible suggests that the dominion of sin has been utterly crushed, it also attests to the believer's continual struggle. In his treatise, "The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remnants of Indwelling Sin in Believers," Owen grapples with Paul's statement in Romans 7:21: "I find then the principle of sin in me." In dealing with the dual realities of sin's defeat yet presence, he argues that sin is very much alive though no longer universally so. He is quite explicit when he writes, "Grace changeth the nature of man, but nothing can change the nature of sin." The hold of sin continues in the believer, but not totally. Sinclair Ferguson has summarized Owen's point clearly: "The nature of sin does not change in regeneration or sanctification, but its status in us is radically altered."<sup>(3)</sup> To return to the illustration of the dense forest, Owen argues that the dominion of sin no longer exists for the believer, not because the forest has been completely cleared, but because many of the trees and some of the underbrush have been uprooted. Some areas (i.e., metaphorical trees) where sin once reigned without any influence to the contrary no longer exist. The forest is still present, but there are now clearings, areas where trees have been uprooted and the tangle of vines removed. To express it another way, in God's mighty act of redemption, his renovating, revivifying grace removed some of the towering tree-like sins in the believer's life. With some of the trees, however, the growth has been merely retarded by pruning; others remain untouched by grace. The believer may go years without a knowledge of the presence of this or that particular tree. In it all, however, sin no longer controls one's totality. The normal Christian life is one of struggle with the residual trees in all of our "forests".

Third, the constant potency of evil toward the believer is examined by Owen in his exposition of Matthew 26:41 ("Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation"). The frequency of solicitation to evil and the believer's proneness to its beckonings are ample evidence that the Christian life is one of serious labors, not of quick resolutions. Solicitations toward evil come from two sources, external and internal. For example, Owen lists four occasions when the hour of temptation is commonly at hand: times of unusual outward prosperity, times of spiritual coldness and periods of formality in duties, times of great spiritual success, and times of self-confidence as in Peter's affirmation, "I will not deny thee" (Works 6:130). To Owen, if sin is not an ever-present possibility, the Bible's warnings to be watchful are ludicrous.

The presence of sin in the believer's experience mandates two responses. First, because sin is no longer extensively or intensively universal (the domination of sin has been broken), there is the ground of assurance that one has become the recipient of divine light and grace (therein is the saint's joy and confidence in the struggle with sin; that is, in our union with Christ). Second, the remnants of sin's dominance (now called indwelling sin), call for serious striving to limit its reign, realizing that the normal Christian life is one of struggle and ragings, though not to the exclusion of profound joy and advances. It is also in this context that part of the glorious hope for the Christian is magnified when he or she is aware that the fight with sin will end when we are in his presence.

## **John Owen and the Human Solution**

For Owen, and his English contemporaries, the remedy for sin's dominion is Christ's victory given to us in the regenerating work of God the Spirit. The solution to indwelling sin in the believer involves a divine work also; it is the renewing work of the Spirit. In both supernatural first-causes, one is graciously acted upon and responds in gratitude and affection. Ferguson summarized the point thusly: "As in the inauguration of the new life, there is the act of regeneration, producing the exercise of God-given faith, so in sanctification, there is the work of grace, producing the exercise of duty, and the response of obedience." <sup>(4)</sup> While the objective cure for sin's destruction is the redemptive work of Jesus Christ applied by the grace of God and bestowed by the Holy Spirit, this is subjectively applied by the Spirit's work in the redeemed, whereby he calls them to obedience, the obedience of progressive conformity to Christ. The latter ministry of God's Spirit focuses on the progressive diminution of the power of indwelling sin. It has two aspects according to J. I. Packer: "Sanctification has a double aspect. Its positive side is vivification, the growing and maturing of the new man; its negative side is mortification, the weakening and killing of the old man." <sup>(5)</sup> In the explanation of these twin aspects, Owen is particularly helpful.

### **Vivification: The Renewal of Life in the Believer**

According to Owen a number of actions promote spiritual progress. In his work, he capsulizes numerous important elements relative to the positive aspects of sanctification. One treatise pivots on Romans 8:6: "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the spirit is life and peace." Private means for focusing the mind on God are, for example, prayer and meditation (he elsewhere takes up Bible reading and memorization). Of the importance of meditation he notes, "Whosoever shall sincerely engage in this duty and shall abide constant therein, he will make such a refreshing progress in his apprehension of heavenly things as he will be greatly satisfied withal" (Works 7:319).

Corporate aspects of positive steps toward the diminishment of the grip of indwelling sin (i.e., the fruit of the flesh) are also crucial. In fact, the elements of corporate worship--hearing the Word of God preached, and attendance upon the sacraments--are crucial. Sanctification can only occur to the extent that one's faith is in the proper object, God in Christ.

### **Mortification: The Death of Sin in the Believer**

Returning to the forest image, the dark, dense impenetrable forest of huge trees and entangling underbrush has been broken forever; the dominion of sin, its universal power without any ameliorating influences, has been ended. There are now clearings in the jungle; some of the trees have been rooted out, others pruned. This new condition is the state of the believer in indwelling sin (i.e., sin remains, but it is

no longer all-pervasive). The goal of the spiritual life is that of continuing the work of clearing the forest, opening ever-enlarged clearings, and the discovery of new trees to uproot (if uprooting is not possible, the goal should be to remove as many branches and cut away as much undergrowth as possible). The negative activity of putting sin to death is what Owen calls mortification. In the treatise, *On the Mortification of Sin in the Believer*, an exposition of Romans 8:13 ("If you by the Spirit put to death the deeds of the flesh, you shall live"), he states several salient principles. It must be remembered that Owen is no pacifist in the matter of mortification; it is not a matter of "letting go and letting God." For example, he writes, "He doth not so work our mortification in us as not to keep it still an act of our obedience" (Works 7:34).

Owen was a realist in his teaching concerning indwelling sin; he refused to offer promises about the outcome of duties that are contrary to experience and Scripture.

He strenuously argued, for example, that while sin can be weakened and some forms of wickedness uprooted, it cannot be utterly killed or destroyed (thus the distinguishing mark of the true saint is not "victory" so much as it is an unrelenting struggle until the burden of ourselves is lifted in the final redemption). Further, mortification is not simply the presence of a quiet, sedate demeanor; nor is it the creation of a diversion or cover-up; it is the actual killing of sin.

The "dysfunctional" human character, according to Owen, differs vastly from the description of secular psychologists and even some Christians in the same field of advice-giving. The human dilemma stems from a voluntary choice that has resulted in the corruption of the very core of his or her being (i.e., the heart), whence all subsequent actions find their source and cause. The remedy, as one would expect, is not to be found in the adjudication of the victim's rights; it comes only when a person, as a responsible, culpable agent, recognizes his or her own guilt and seeks forgiveness.

The place to begin the mortification of a particular sin is for the believer to recognize sin for all its terrible potential, meditate on its destructive power, and load the conscience with the heavy weight of its guilt. "Get a clear and abiding sense upon thy mind and conscience of the guilt, danger, and evil of that sin wherewith thou art perplexed" (Works 6:51). Hurriedly claiming a verse such as 1 John 1:9 may not only be a misapplication of Scripture to rid the burden of sin upon one's conscience; it may be a form of subterfuge. Owen suggests, on the contrary, that we should load our consciences with the awfulness of our sin and only then allow God to grant our minds peace! Further, he suggests that a careful analysis should be made to determine whether sin has a deeper cause than its external manifestation.

Also, he urges Christians to react quickly and decisively against sin, not minimizing its wickedness or neglecting to recognize its potential for destruction. "Rise mightily against the first actings of thy distemper, its first conceptions; suffer it not to get the least ground" (Works 6:62). The believer must become an astute observer of the

occasions when he or she is vulnerable to sinning, and carefully endeavor to avoid them.

"Consider what ways, what companies, what opportunities, what studies, what business, what conditions, have at any time given, or do usually give, advantages to distempers, and set thyself heedfully against them all" (Works 6:62). Though Owen states several other points (this being only the briefest summary), he concludes the discussion arguing that the saint must carefully keep in view the wonder, majesty, and kindness of God, being ever-mindful of his or her own vileness (Works 6:63-70). It is the saint's union with Christ that allows one to be a persistent realist when it comes to the issue of struggle with sin. Jonathan Edwards' resolve makes sense if we are, indeed, united to God through the blood stains of our dying advocate. "Resolved: Never to give over, nor in the least to slacken my fight with my corruption, however unsuccessful I may be."

"Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever did," is a romantic line from Sound of Music, Maria's impassioned statement to Colonel Van Trapp. It illustrates a truth that is the point of this article. While the new birth happens to us, we are active in our growth as Christians. Growth does not just happen. There are no easy short-cuts or quick victories. It is a journey that will inevitably lead to glory, but the road is long and circuitous. Do not be called aside by the lure of "the easy, higher way"; it simply does not exist. The mark of the saint is not victory; it is a struggle with the enemy who is already condemned, a struggle which is never eradicated until we hear our Savior's call to enter into his glory in the last day, the first day of our rest from the power of sin.

1 [ Back ] David F. Wells, No Place For Truth, Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology? (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 68.

2 [ Back ] James I. Packer, Introduction to John Owen's Sin and Temptation: The Challenge To Personal Godliness, ed. by James M. Houston (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1983), xxix.

3 [ Back ] Sinclair B. Ferguson, John Owen on the Christian Life (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 125-26.

4 [ Back ] Ibid., 55.

5 [ Back ] James I. Packer, A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 199.

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