



## A Profound and Biblically Theocentric Theologian

*J.I. Packer Writes on John Owen*

I should perhaps end by saying a little more about the benefit that I myself have gained from Owen's devotional theology which I have been recommending so highly. . . . I said earlier that it saved my sanity: let me explain how.

I was converted—that is, as I now see it, I came to Jesus Christ in a decisive commitment, needing and seeking God's forgiveness and acceptance, and assured of Christ's redeeming love for me and His personal call to me—in my first university term. The group which took responsibility for my nurture as a Christian was heavily pietistic in tone and outlook, and they left me in no doubt that for me, as a Christian, the most important thing henceforth was the quality of my walk with God. In the familiar small-minority manner the group was decidedly elitist in spirit, holding that only Bible-believing evangelicals could say anything worth hearing about the Christian life, and conversely that whatever evangelicals who were thought sound enough to address the group might say about the Christian life was bound to be good.

Having absorbed this elitism by osmosis as new converts absorb things, I listened with great expectation and excitement to the preachers and teachers whom the group brought in week by week, viewing them as undoubtedly the top devotional instructors in the country. Also, I read widely in the devotional literature which the group approved. While highly critical of other forms of Christianity (not, I think, without reason, but certainly without proper humility and respect), I drank up all that came to me from these approved sources as being in truth oracles from God. Had I not taken it all so seriously my traumas would have been less.

Whether what I thought I heard was what was really said may be left an open question, but what I thought I was being told was this. There are two

*The Winter 2007 issue of Knowing & Doing profiled Puritan theologian John Owen. J.I. Packer, author of Knowing God and many other influential books, has spent a lifetime studying the treasures of Puritan life and thought.*



*In this essay, originally written as an introduction for Sin and Temptation, a collection of some of Owen's writings, Dr. Packer describes the crucial influence Owen's work had on his own life and theology.*

sorts of Christians, first-class and second-class, "spiritual" and "carnal" (a distinction drawn from 1 Corinthians 3:1-3). The former know sustained peace and joy, constant inner confidence and regular victory over temptation and sin, in a way that the latter do not. Anyone who hopes to be of any use to God must first be "spiritual" in the stated sense. As a lonely, dithery adolescent introvert whose new-found assurance had not changed his temperament overnight, I had to conclude that the reality of "spiritual" experience was not yet mine; yet I certainly hoped to be useful to God. So what was I to do?

The message as received continued as follows, speaking to that question. There is a secret of rising from carnality to spirituality, a secret mirrored in the maxim: Let go, let God. This secret has to do with becoming Spirit-filled. The Spirit-filled man is taken out of the second half of Romans 7 (the experience of constant moral defeat through self-reliance) into the sunshine of Romans 8 where he walks in the Spirit and is not so defeated. (Let me

say that I do not now accept this understanding of Romans 7, or of the relation between Romans 7 and 8, or of the quality of experience to which Romans 8 points; to be honest, I now see it as a pietistic exegetical freak; in those days, however, it was the only view of the matter I had met. But to continue.) The secret of being Spirit-filled, so I gathered, is twofold.

To start with, one must *deny self*. It seems clear to me now that when Jesus called for self-denial, He meant the negating of *carnal* self—that is to say self-will, self-assertion, the Adamic syndrome, the sinful, egocentric behavior-pattern which one has been developing from birth, the recurring irrational impulse to do anything rather than obey God and embrace what one knows to be right.

But what I seemed to hear then was a summons to deny *personal* self, thereby opening the door to being taken over by Jesus Christ in such a way that my present experience of thinking and willing would become something different, an experience of Christ Himself living in me, animating me, and doing the thinking and choosing for me. Put like that, of course, it sounds more like the formula of demon-possession than the ministry of the indwelling Christ according to the New Testament. But in those days I knew nothing about demon-possession, and what I have just verbalized seemed to be the plain meaning of “I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (Galations 2:20, KJV) as explained by the approved speakers. We used to sing this chorus:

O to be saved from myself, dear Lord,  
 O to be lost in Thee;  
 O that it may be no more I  
 But Christ who lives in me!

Whatever its author may have meant, I sang it whole-heartedly in the sense spelled out above.

Part two of the secret, the positive counterpart of self-denial, was *consecration* and *faith*. Consecration meant total self-surrender, laying one’s all on the altar, handing over every part of one’s life to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Nowadays I perceive this as another name for that outliving of repentance which the gospel requires of Christians as such, but then I saw it, as I am sure I was encouraged to see it, as part of the special technique for entry into the higher form of Christian experience. Through consecration one would be emptied of

self, and the empty vessel would then automatically be filled with the Spirit so that Christ’s full power within one would be ready for use. It did not occur to me then, as it has done since, to wonder whether imagery that seems to come from the world of charging batteries, draining and replenishing receptacles, and switching on the electricity, is really apt for expressing the Holy Spirit’s personal ministry.

With consecration was to go *faith*, which as explained by them meant looking to the indwelling Christ moment by moment, not only to do one’s thinking and choosing in one and for one, but also one’s fighting and resisting of temptation. Rather than meet temptation directly (which would be fighting in one’s own strength), one should hand it over to Christ to deal with, and expect Him to banish it. I nowadays think that the way to deal with temptation is at once to say no, and with that to ask the Lord for strength to keep saying no and actually mortify—that is, do to death, squelch, and enervate—the sinful urge. Then, however, I simply tried to practice the consecration and faith technique as I had understood it—heap powerful magic, as I supposed, the precious secret of victorious living.

But I did not get on well at all. I scraped my inside, figuratively speaking, to find things to yield to the Lord so as to make consecration complete, and I worked hard to “let go and let God” when temptation made its presence felt. At that time I did not know that Harry Ironside, sometime pastor of Moody Memorial Church, Chicago, once drove himself into a full-scale mental breakdown through trying to find the secret that I was trying to find in the way that I was trying to find it. Nor did I then conclude, as I have concluded since, that the higher Christian life as I was conceiving it is an unreality, a will-o’-the-wisp which no one has ever laid hold of at all, and that those who testify to their experience in these terms really, if unwittingly, distort what has happened to them.

I took it for granted, as one tends to do at such times, that my peers had no problem here. Plainly these cheerful Christians must all have mastered the technique of victory over sin, and I was the only one struggling. Nowadays I take account of the way in which in tight, elitist groups everyone instinctively works to keep up appearances. At that time, however, the assured quality of others’

discipleship merely awed me and drove me into further cheerless bouts of inside-scraping.

And then (thank God) the group was given a library by a former member, and I was put in charge of it and found there an uncut set (twenty-three volumes) of Owen. Having never heard of him and being nose-y about books, I cut some pages more or less at random and dipped into the contents of this present volume. Through what I read, reinforced by another book from the library (J.C. Ryle's classic *Holiness*), my gracious God sorted me out. Like the young man I met last Sunday, I found that Owen knew exactly what was going on inside me and what I was going to think next, and was reaching out across the centuries to speak to my condition.

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. He showed me that there is far more than I had known both to indwelling sin in believers and to God's gracious work of sanctification. He searched me to the root of my being, bringing God awesomely close in the way

that speakers and writers with unction are able to do. He taught me what it means to mortify sin and how to go about it. He made clear to me the real nature of the Holy Spirit's ministry in and to the believer, and of spiritual growth and progress, and of faith's victory. He told me how to understand myself as a Christian and live before God in a morally and spiritually honest way, without pretending either to be what I am not or not to be what I am. It is not too much at all to say that God used him to save my sanity. And he made every point by direct biblical exegesis, handling Scripture with a profundity that I had not met before, nor I think since save in Luther, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards.

Many will find it hard to tune in to one who takes the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin as seriously as Owen does, for the moral relativism and inversion of values that mark the permissive society have deeply infected the church. But that only shows how urgently we need to regain the awesome awareness of God and spiritual issues which breathes through all the work of this profoundly and biblically theocentric theologian.

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