QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

The Experience of Dissent: John Owen and Congregational Life in Revolutionary and Restoration England

Gribben, C. (2019). The Experience of Dissent: John Owen and Congregational Life in Revolutionary and Restoration England. In M. Davies , A. Dunan-Page, & J. Halcome (Eds.), *Church Life : Congregations, and the Experience of Dissent in Seventeenth-Century England* (pp. 119-135). Oxford University Press.

Published in:
Church Life : Congregations, and the Experience of Dissent in Seventeenth-Century England

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

Publisher rights
© 2019 Oxford University Press.
This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher's policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Open Access
This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback

Download date:09. Nov. 2026

6

The Experience of Dissent

John Owen and Congregational Life in Revolutionary and Restoration England

Crawford Gribben

'Christ hath instituted a beautiful order in his church, if it were discovered and improved', John Owen declared in a sermon in September 1682.[1] He was old, infirm, and increasingly aware of how little he had achieved.[2] As a preacher, writer, academic, and administrator he had spent his adult life working to expand, and then to uphold, the community of the godly, in a long sequence of publications that assumed, defended, and then worried over the adequacy of his literary style, theological method, and the influence he had achieved. Owen's concern for the betterment of local church life had always been central to his activity, whether as a parish minister in the 1640s, as chaplain to Cromwell in the invasions of Ireland and Scotland in 1649–51, as vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford from 1652–8, as a republican plotter from 1658–60, and as a leader of Dissent until his death in 1683. But, as the end approached, he grew increasingly pessimistic about the short-term future of the Dissenting churches. The circumstances of the godly at this point were very different from those of the heady days of the English Revolution. The impaled heads of his former colleagues in that revolution, still on public display around London over twenty

For feedback on an earlier version of this chapter, I am grateful to the editors, the attendees of the 'Dissenting Experience' conference, 'Church Life: Pastors & their Congregations', held at DWL on 9 November 2013, and to members of the Early Modern History Seminar, Trinity College Dublin.

[1] John Owen, *Posthumous Sermons* (1756): 'The Duty of a Pastor', in William H. Goold (ed.), *The Works of John Owen*, 24 vols (London and Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850–5; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965–8), IX, 452–62 (453). Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Owen's works will refer to this edition.

[2] On the later period of Owen's life, see Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 209–62.

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

years after their brutal executions, were symbols of the retributive justice of an unforgiving government, and powerful reminders of the dangerous marginality of Dissent.[3]

For all of their power, nevertheless, the governments of Charles II were not beyond challenge: Owen believed that stark warnings of God's judgement upon their backsliding had been witnessed in plague, fire, and a sequence of spectacular comets.[4] But the godly had to be reminded to dissent. Owen's sermons in the late 1670s and early 1680s warned his congregants that they were identifying too closely with the culture by which they were being persecuted, and that, unless they repented, they would share its fate:

> When all endeavours fail, warnings fail, chastisements fail, preaching of the word fails, and the silver is not separated from the dross; when men can scarce, professors can scarce, bear to be warned; [. . .] there is no way but we must all [go] into the same furnace; nothing else will do.[5]

But Owen did not give in to despair. He believed that the situation was reversible, and shared the older puritan expectation of the global triumph of Protestant Christianity in the latter days of history. The Independent or Congregational churches, among which he had been a leading figure for many years, would confound the broader culture by rejecting its values of prosperity and success, and conquer the world by recovering their other-worldliness. He was certain that the beginning of this latter-day glory would be marked by the expansion of biblical church order, and increasing numbers of biblically constituted church fellowships.[6] But he did not believe that this great revival was something he would experience: 'I have wished sometimes I could live to see it', he considered, 'but I do not think I shall'.[7]

This chapter will describe Owen's experience of Dissent before and during the English Revolution as context for a discussion of its maintenance thereafter. It will, then, do several things. First, it will outline Owen's experiments in ecclesiology in the 1640s, when the Independent party emerged as a movement of reform within the national church, and only hesitantly as a denomination in its own right.[8] Secondly, it will suggest reasons for his apparent lack of interest in ecclesiology in the 1650s: a period in which his principal writings make little

[3] Robert Latham and William Matthews (eds.), *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 11 vols (London: Bell, 1970–83), II, 31 (5 February 1661); Maurice Exwood and H. L. Lehmann (trans. and eds.), *The Journals of William Schellinks' Travels in England, 1661–1663* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1993), 48, 51.

[4] John Owen, *Posthumous Sermons* (1854): 'The Furnace of Divine Wrath', in *Works*, XVI, 425–31 (428, 431).

[5] Owen, 'Furnace of Divine Wrath', in *Works*, XVI, 427.

[6] For the broader contexts of puritan millennial expectation, see Crawford Gribben, *The Puritan Millennium: Literature and Theology, 1550–1682* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000).

[7] Owen, 'Duty of a Pastor', in *Works*, IX, 453.

[8] For the emergence of the Congregational movement, see Nuttall, *Visible Saints*; Halcomb, 'Congregational'.

0004263782.INDD 120 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

reference to the benefits of church membership, and in which Owen's own ecclesiastical affiliation cannot be traced. Thirdly, it will discuss the renewal of his interest in church life in the 1660s and beyond, particularly as his Restoration works on the principles of public worship, together with a very complete set of auditor's notes covering almost twenty years of his preaching, offer new ways of understanding the challenge he faced in turning local church principles into local church practice.

The aim of this chapter is to trace the development of important themes in Owen's thinking about church government, church membership, and the observation of the sacraments or 'gospel ordinances' (namely, baptism and the Lord's Supper), while paying attention to changes within the membership of his congregations and the broader circumstances of congregational life, including the choice of meeting places and the often uncertain political contexts in which these meetings occurred. It will note the distortion evident in earlier work on the subject, caused by over-reliance on published sources and the mistaking of principles for practice. It will comment too upon Owen's most enduring challenge: that of calling upon his congregants to embrace, rather than deny, a Dissenting identity—a performance made all the more difficult when caught between the competing dangers of a persecuting government and an angry God.

This chapter will also consider Owen's sense of failure. For Owen died lamenting the decay of the religious movement that he had helped to create.[9] His many publications in defence of both high Calvinism and Independent church government had not prevented serious, and perhaps fatal, debates among Dissenters about such basic Christian doctrines as the Trinity, or the most elemental ideas of the Protestant Reformation. He could not understand why the godly had 'grown altogether indifferent as to the doctrine of God's eternal election, the sovereign efficacy of grace in the conversion of sinners, justification by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ', or how they could 'quarrel and dispute about the interest of works in justification; about general redemption, which takes off the efficacy of the redeeming work of Christ; and about the perseverance of the saints'.[10] Theological divisions were sapping the integrity of the community of Dissenters who had not been persuaded by the extraordinary campaign of theological polemic that Owen had sustained over forty years, eighty individually published titles, and millions of words, including the longest commentary ever published on the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews. Indeed, in his last years, Owen found it difficult even to persuade his own small, loyal, and close-knit congregation of the merit of his ideas.

[9] For Owen's impact on Dissent, see Tim Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011).

[10] John Owen, *Posthumous Sermons* (1721): 'Perilous Times', in *Works*, IX, 320–34 (327); 'Duty of a Pastor', in *Works*, IX, 459.

0004263782.INDD 121 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

Towards the end of his life, Owen became convinced of his own failure, as well as that of the movement he had inspired. This admission is a key control for our reading of the textbooks on church order published by Owen in this period. Despite his clear convictions as to their best practice, and his expectations of their glorious future, by the 1680s Owen feared that the Dissenting churches were in ruins. He was fighting for the survival of his own congregation, as well as the godly cause it represented, as the experience of Dissent threatened to give way to the experience of defeat.[11]

*

Owen spent much of his career thinking about a church life rooted in a scripturally sanctioned gospel order, and his late concern for the future of the Dissenting fellowships reflected convictions that had driven a great deal of his activity over forty years of preaching, writing, and organization. He was no stranger to setbacks or to the strategies of survival, having grown up in the family of a Church of England clergyman in the decades following the defeat of the Elizabethan puritan movement. We know very little about the circumstances of his childhood, or about the values or prejudices inculcated within the family home and parish church, but it is clear that his father was not a Separatist. Later in life, Owen described his father as 'a Nonconformist all his days, and a painful labourer in the vineyard of the Lord': a description that has caused some historians to link the family to an underground movement of Presbyterians.[12]

The terminology here is important and precise. Michael Watts's survey of Dissenting history demonstrates that 'Separatists' wanted nothing at all to do with the Established Church during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, while the term 'Nonconformist' was used in the same period to refer to 'Puritans who were in communion with the Church of England but who declined to conform to certain practices prescribed by the Prayer Book'. 'Sectary' referred to those believers who refused to conform to the Established Church even during the Reformation of the Long Parliament, and a 'Dissenter' was anyone from any of those backgrounds who did not conform to the Church of England after 1662.[13] Of course, it is likely that Owen's description of his father owed as much to the circumstances of its articulation as to his memories of childhood: 'Nonconformist' is still a descriptor more often associated with Restoration Dissenters than with Jacobean malcontents, and in describing his father as a 'painful' Nonconformist Owen was not necessarily linking him with any radical programme for ecclesiastical reform, but identifying his family, albeit uncomfortably, with the Church of England against the rival claims of Separatists. This was in contrast to his own separation. Owen may have been using the

[11] Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984); Gribben, *John Owen*.

[12] John Owen, *A Review of the True Nature of Schism* (1657), in *Works*, XIII, 207–75 (224).

[13] Watts, 1.

0004263782.INDD 122 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

same term—'Nonconformist'—to differentiate between his father's ambiguous adherence to and his own dissent from the Established Church.

Nevertheless Owen's recollection of his father's Presbyterianism was likely accurate for, as he began his writing career, he certainly regarded himself as part of such a movement, and tried to position himself as one of its spokesmen. Owen published his second book, *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* (1644), to defend the Presbyterian system against the 'Prelaticall, or Diocesan' on the one hand, and the 'Independent, or Congregationall', on the other.[14] When he arrived in his first parish, Fordham in Essex, in 1643, he had identified himself as a Presbyterian and, consequently, as an opponent of religious toleration. The Presbyterian movement, insofar as it shared a common agenda in the early 1640s, premised a national church structure in which hierarchies of church courts, from the decisions of which no dissent would be permitted, would replace hierarchies of individuals. At this point, Owen's 'acquaintance lay wholly with ministers and people of the presbyterian way', he later explained, though he had 'looked very little farther into those affairs', he admits, 'than I was led by an opposition to Episcopacy and ceremonies'.[15]

This qualification is important, for, in the mid 1640s, it is not clear that 'the Presbyterian way' had been defined beyond its commitment to a national church governed by a hierarchy of courts. English Presbyterians did not yet have a distinctive confession of faith and, while they identified with their Scottish brethren, they were unable to draw upon the legislation that had given the ecclesiology of their northern neighbours some degree of formal sanction. English Presbyterians lacked the distinctive structures of a creed and a liturgy until the convening of the Westminster Assembly (1643–53) and the publication of the long and elaborate confession of faith that was adopted by Parliament in 1647, alongside a description of church government, thereby providing institutional support for the renewal of the national church.[16] While English Presbyterians shared with supporters of the old episcopacy a commitment to the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, it was not easy to point to any key doctrinal difference.

The Westminster Assembly's legally defining theological manifestos and descriptions of church governance appeared as Owen settled into life as a parish minister in the puritan heartland of Essex. It is telling, however, that Owen's defence of Presbyterian church order was always qualified and never complete. 'He that builds his faith upon preachers, though they preach nothing but truth, and he pretend to believe it, hath indeed no faith at all, but a wavering opinion, build upon a rotten foundation', he explained in 1644, in a call for conscientious conviction that also served to limit dependence upon the ordained clergy whose teaching office was a structurally vital component of the emerging

[14] John Owen, *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* (1644), in *Works*, XIII, 1–49 (39).
[15] Owen, *True Nature of Schism*, in *Works*, XIII, 222–3.
[16] See further Chapter 4 in this volume.

0004263782.INDD 123 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

Presbyterian system.[17] But it was also telling that *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* included no discussion of the issue that would come to differentiate Presbyterian church government from all other ecclesiological models.[18] Owen defended Presbyterianism, then, as long as he could create it in his own image.

Consequently, as the Westminster Assembly defined a national Presbyterian platform, Owen began to rethink the values and convictions that he had brought into his ministry. He reconsidered the issues of church government and the limits of religious toleration, focusing his mind on biblical expectations for the government of church and society, and dealing with the disappointments that attended his efforts to revitalize parish churches. By 1646, his convictions had begun to drift in a Congregational direction. It is likely that his adoption of this new model of church governance encouraged his reconsideration of the issue of religious toleration. Owen had arrived in Fordham as a Presbyterian opposed to the state's acceptance of sects. But the Presbyterian hegemony had been established just as Owen came to appreciate his distance from it. Three years later, he moved to the nearby parish of Coggeshall as an Independent minister whose security depended upon the very toleration he had once contested. In 1646, Owen went public with his new positions on both ecclesiology and toleration, publishing *A Short Defensative about Church-Government* and *A Country Essay for the Practice of Church-Government there*.[19] Typifying the ecclesiological ambiguity of the period, however, some of his neighbours continued to regard him as a Presbyterian.[20] In the ferment of religious ideas that characterized the mid 1640s, competing positions could be fluid and indistinct.

Nevertheless, one of the most significant features of Owen's new model of church order was its radical reconsideration of the role of the laity. In the new and empowering marketplace of ideas that was opened up by the print culture of the English Revolution, laypeople became the arbiters of religious truth. Scott Spurlock has illustrated how Presbyterian clergy could be coerced into taking part in public debates, in which the advocates of competing doctrines tested their theological mettle, however reluctantly, in front of a lay audience. Presbyterian clergy felt compelled to defend their principles when attacked by advocates of the new religious movements, but could not do so without implicitly acknowledging that they did not possess the hegemony they claimed, and so undermined their position in the very act of upholding it.[21] Much of the energy of this sudden democratization of religion was appropriated by the Independents.

[17] Owen, *Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished*, in *Works*, XIII, 41.

[18] Sarah Gibbard Cook, 'A Political Biography of a Religious Independent: John Owen, 1616–1683' (unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, 1971), 51.

[19] Owen's *Defensative* and *Country Essay* were both '*annexed*' to his printed sermon, *A Vision of Unchangeable Free Mercy* (1646), 46–56; see also Owen, *Works*, VIII, 43–69.

[20] William Bartlet, *Ichnographia. Or A Model of the Primitive Congregational Way* (1647), 23–4; Gribben, *John Owen*, 67.

[21] R. Scott Spurlock, *Cromwell in Scotland: Conquest and Religion, 1650–1660* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2007), 54–71.

0004263782.INDD 124 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

As Frank Bremer has recently demonstrated, Independent church life opened up a new range of opportunities for members of the laity, from the public performance of conversion narratives to new forms of local church leadership and, increasingly, to lay preaching.[22] The demotic energy that was driving the movement of religious Independents was being made visible both in public performance and in print.[23]

Owen's new views of church order were crystallized in an ecclesiological manual that he entitled *Eshcol: A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan* (1648). This outline of church government was expressed in terms that were more emotive than those of his earlier work on the theme. 'Love is the fountain of all duties towards God and man', he noted, and believers should support each other through 'troubles, sorrows, visitations, wants, poverties, persecutions of the saints', for church fellowship enabled them to encourage their brethren: to 'pity their woundings, to feel their strokes, to refresh their spirits, help bear their burdens upon their own shoulders'.[24] His innovating ecclesiology was supported by assumptions about the empowering role of the laity that seemed foreign to the emerging Presbyterian system, which focused much more on an active clergy and a passive laity. The variation in influence here was structurally significant. Owen was emphasizing the need for mutually supportive relationships within the local congregation as his Presbyterian peers were arguing about the power of discipline, regional oversight, and the keys of the kingdom.

Owen learned, however, that in reality theory was different from practice. For all that he valorized church fellowship, his first two parishes disappointed him. In his earliest published work, he described his parishioners at Fordham as 'grossly ignorant', and followed this by describing the people of his second parish, Coggeshall, as 'poor, numerous, provoking'.[25] Having committed these opinions to print, Owen may have felt it necessary to move on to pastures new, not least because it may have been hard to depend upon the support of those whom he had so publicly castigated. Yet, Owen's career choices were also reflecting changes in his thinking. In the later 1640s, as the English Presbyterian movement began both to systematize its positions and to work towards the imposition of strict social control, Owen moved away from its claims, adopting a theory of church government that insisted upon congregational autonomy and which argued that toleration should be extended to all Trinitarian Protestants.

[22] See further Francis J. Bremer, *Lay Empowerment and the Development of Puritanism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[23] Matthew Bingham illustrates the extent to which the new congregational movement appealed to emerging demotic values in its construction of an active and adjudicating lay readership. See Matthew Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* (forthcoming, Oxford University Press).

[24] John Owen, *Eshcol: A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan* (1648), in *Works*, XIII, 51–87 (62, 73).

[25] John Owen, *The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ: Unfolded in Two Short Catechismes* (1645), in *Works*, I, 463–94 (465); *Ouranon Ourania: The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth* (1649), in *Works*, VIII, 243–79 (245).

0004263782.INDD 125 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

His practice in the church in Coggeshall followed suit, and opened up new opportunities for the involvement of the laity. Owen installed John Sams, for example, as a teaching elder to help in the preaching ministry, despite the fact that his new assistant had never been ordained: an action entirely consistent with his published defence of lay preaching.[26] At the same time, Owen convened midweek meetings of the godly for Bible study, in which the meaning of Scripture was established not by declarative sermons but in free discussion of church members.

These innovations were much to the surprise of a neighbouring Presbyterian clergyman, Ralph Josselin, who viewed the intrusions of the laity in Owen's congregation with a degree of dismay.[27] But the two men continued to cooperate, sharing pulpits regularly to cover for each other's absence: a striking illustration of the manner in which the emerging and competing denominational agendas were always subject to practical, local needs. After all, Josselin could hardly have missed the fact that Owen was taking risks: he was developing opportunities for new kinds of lay participation just as the Blasphemy Act (1648) identified Presbyterianism as the national religion, made the public profession of Catholicism a capital crime, and criminalized unorthodox expressions of Protestant faith, the ideas of which spread rapidly in uncontrolled lay debate. The Blasphemy Act intended to put the genie back into the bottle by bringing the momentum of religious radicalism to a shuddering halt: Owen's radical departures from Presbyterian norms could only have been interpreted as dissent from the ambitions of its consolidating strictures.

Of course, as the Revolution's first conservative turn, the Presbyterian Blasphemy Act appalled radicals in the army, and their coup, staged in December 1648, opened new opportunities for radical reform. After Pride's Purge, new powerbrokers established the dominance of Independent MPs in the Rump Parliament, and made possible the trial and then the execution of Charles I. Owen had been propelled into these messy political affairs by means of his increasingly close connections with army commanders. Army leaders and the politicians they controlled turned to Owen to provide a providential rationale for the unprecedented turn of events. Preaching to Parliament on the day following the regicide, and on several occasions in the later spring, Owen read the English Revolution in terms of God's judgement on Antichrist—a theological principle that he extended to embrace all forms of government by monarchy—and he both called for and expected first a European and then a global campaign to establish the English Protestant republic.

[26] On Sams, see Shaw, II, 388; *MPWA*, IV, 707 n., 882; Owen, *Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished*, in *Works*, XIII, 18.

[27] Alan Macfarlane (ed.), *The Diary of Ralph Josselin 1616–1683* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 174.

0004263782.INDD 126 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

Owen's success in constructing a sense-making eschatological narrative proved attractive to the army leadership. Within months of the regicide, Owen was called upon to leave his parish work and to accompany the army in its invasions of Ireland and Scotland. The experience was transformative. In Dublin, he was faced with the horrors of life in a war zone capital and found, for the first time, a ready audience for his preaching: a 'numerous multitude of as thirsting a people after the gospel as ever yet I conversed withal'.[28] His preaching contributed to the claims to spiritual experience that distinguished the most radical of the city's Independent fellowships: the congregation that met in Christ Church and was led by John Rogers. Owen's name would feature regularly in this church's narratives of conversion, published by Rogers in 1653. Dorothy Emett, for example, remembered that 'Mr. Owen was the first man by whose means, and Ministry I became sensible of my condition', and Andrew Manwaring, a major in the army, found that Owen 'did me much good, and made *me* see *my misery* in the *want* of *Christ*'.[29] Yet, for all of his contribution to Rogers's congregation, Owen's own church membership remained unclear. However much his preaching was empowering lay activity, his status as a government employee may well have overridden any opportunities he might have had to be formally recognized as a member of a church, and he likely retained his membership in the fellowship at Coggeshall. If that were the case, it is uncertain how or where Owen could have participated in the Lord's Supper, as Independents were at this point only slowly negotiating the terms by which interchurch cooperation could be advanced. Perhaps for the first time Owen had to imagine how Christian faith should be sustained without access to one of the Protestant 'means of grace'.

It may be significant, then, that we can find so little evidence of congregational involvement in the busiest years of Owen's life. Back in London, from 1651, he led efforts to formulate a national church structure, shaping the new world that emerged from the chaos of revolution, and was for a time very closely identified with the republican government, defining the boundaries for an increasingly conservative national religion while not easily being placed within it. But he grew concerned by the direction of the English Revolution, and by the declining moral quality of its leaders, as evidenced by the failure of his attempts to establish a national religious platform. He spent much of the 1650s serving in official capacities, most notably as vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford, but we have no record of his pastoral oversight of any congregation during this period. His frequent preaching at Whitehall may have made it impossible for him to continue in any regular church fellowship in his hometown. This lack of evidence for an active church life may also signal a broader trend that was marked in Owen's literary work in the 1650s. It is notable that the books that he

[28] John Owen, *Of the Death of Christ* (1650), in *Works*, X, 429–79 (479).

[29] John Rogers, *Ohel or Bethshemesh* (1653), 412; 412 [3]. Note the errors in pagination in this part of the book.

0004263782.INDD 127 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

published during this period—several of which have gone on to become evangelical classics—describe the spiritual life in individualistic terms, and without reference to the benefits of either the gospel ordinances or church fellowship. These books appeared, moreover, as Owen withdrew from the very high view of the sacramental power of baptism that he had outlined in his earliest publications, and said very little about the sacraments as means of grace enabling the believer in the struggle against sin, though these kinds of arguments, albeit in moderated form, had become a Protestant commonplace. Owen was exploring the psychological aspect of sanctification at the expense of the sacramental, liturgical, and congregational.

This culture of radical individualism was endemic in the religious ferment of the 1650s. Historians have too readily assumed that the godly could be easily identified at this time in terms of the ecclesial categories that were then being established. Yet we know nothing of the habits of church attendance of some of the best-known representatives of the Revolutionary government, including Oliver Cromwell and John Milton, despite their visibility on the religious and political stage. It is possible that Owen himself, now busier than ever with university administration and with the additional responsibility of regular preaching obligations at Christ Church and St. Mary's, Oxford, as well as in London, was sitting more lightly on the opportunities and obligations of church fellowship by comparison to his congregational activities during either the 1640s or the 1660s, and beyond.

Owen, however, could not steer the Revolution, even in its attempts to establish a new religious settlement. By the end of the 1650s, alarmed by the monarchical tendencies of the new elite, he had fallen out of favour with Oliver Cromwell and had gathered a congregation of old republicans that worked together to undermine the unstable government of his son. The coup backfired badly, and led directly to the events that made possible the restoration of the monarchy. Despite the Declaration of Breda, issued by Charles II in April 1660, and the Worcester House Declaration following in October—signs that the restored king's intention was to achieve a moderate church settlement, if not liberty of conscience for all English Protestants—the returning Parliaments were in no mood for such reconciliation, soon setting about a structural persecution of Dissenters all the more bitter for its being facilitated by some old revolutionaries who purchased their own security by pursuing their former comrades. The networks of the godly were breaking apart. After 1660, Owen's 'experience of defeat' shaped his experience of Dissent.

*

Owen's pastoral career in the 1660s and 1670s was developed in the difficult and demanding circumstances that attended upon the Restoration: the ejection of godly ministers from the national church, the raft of discriminatory legislation known, inaccurately, as the Clarendon Code, and the enduring prospect of

0004263782.INDD 128 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

indulgence. These were difficult years for Owen. He and his wife, Mary, having already lost almost all of their children, divided up their surviving family, living with or otherwise enjoying the protection of some old friends, including the family of former Parliamentarian army officer and son-in-law to Cromwell, Charles Fleetwood, as well as some more unexpected patrons, including the Earl of Oxford, who had been imprisoned in the 1650s, and, possibly, Edward Hyde, the new Earl of Clarendon. Ironically, Owen's involvement in church life is clearest in the period in which that involvement was most dangerous, as the experience of Dissent pushed him to take local congregational contexts as seriously as he had national reform. Owen's horizons narrowed, then, as he turned the attention of the godly from ambitions for global conquest to the material circumstances of survival. His local church principles, first outlined in the later 1640s, now changed to take into account the circumstances of the Restoration: persecution threatened the peace of the churches as the decline in the enthusiasm of the godly paralleled the moral decline of the society from which they were being marginalized.

Owen led three very different congregations during this period. Each varied in size and location, in the kinds of members it attracted, in the number of its leaders, and in the kinds of records that have survived: from government records, reflecting fears of conspiracy, to a church book and an extensive collection of auditor's notes. The earliest, and most likely smallest, of these congregations met in Owen's home in Stadhampton, Oxfordshire, in the immediate aftermath of the Restoration. Owen had bought the house in his last days as vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford. It was, reportedly, the largest house in the village, and a fitting symbol of his successful career. But Owen may have been more interested in facilitating Dissent than in financial display. This meeting drew attendees from among the undergraduate population of the nearby university, including William Penn, the future Quaker leader, whose father complained to Samuel Pepys of Owen's influence.[30] The gathering of this congregation certainly indicates that Owen had retained his commitment to the principles of Independent church government, for the parish church in Stadhampton, in which Owen's father had served as a 'painful' Nonconformist, had by this time come under the care of John Hartcliffe, Owen's brother-in-law, a man of decidedly Presbyterian convictions, who was ejected in 1662. Owen was prepared to dissent even from worship led by a close relative in a building with long-standing family connections.[31]

[30] Penn's father may have had good reason to be concerned. For Owen's congregation, like the meeting of old republicans in Wallingford House in the later 1650s, may have been a centre of conspiracy. In January 1661, in the clampdown on religious Dissenters that followed Thomas Venner's abortive Fifth Monarchist rising in London, Owen's home was raided by the Oxfordshire militia while the congregation was meeting for worship: they confiscated the six or seven cases of pistols that they discovered. See further Gribben, *John Owen*, 181, 212, 215.

[31] Gribben, *John Owen*, 29, 181.

0004263782.INDD 129 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

Owen spent much of the spring and summer of 1662 writing against the pressure for ecclesiastical uniformity that would result in the 'Great Ejection'. His arguments, anonymously published, were not convincing, perhaps in part because they appeared alongside the first of two volumes that he would ghost-write in defence of Charles II and the Church of England, apparently on the instruction of Clarendon.[32] While the ejection did not directly affect him—as he was already ministering outside the Established Church that he had sought to reform—he was dismayed by its effect and appears to have entered a long period of personal unsettledness after August 1662. He worried about the prospects for English Dissent, and took time to consider job offers from the First Church in Boston, and from Harvard.[33] Owen's situation changed, however, as he gradually reconvened the fellowship that had met in Wallingford House in the last years of the English Revolution. Under the protection of Charles Fleetwood, Owen's new congregation, gathering around his home in Stoke Newington, acted as a magnet for old republicans. Its membership grew around the Fleetwood household. Even John Desborough, returning from exile in Switzerland, and after enduring a year in the Tower of London, made his way to Stoke Newington to worship with old friends.[34]

It is from this period that we get the clearest picture of how Owen led and experienced congregational life. In contrast to the silences and suppositions that attend his earlier church involvement, the activities of Owen's later Restoration congregations can be reconstructed in some detail by means of extensive notes taken by one of his auditors. Sir John Hartopp, Charles Fleetwood's son-in-law, began to record Owen's sermons from the mid 1660s, a habit he continued until Owen's death, paying attention to the location of the preaching and its relation to celebrations of the Lord's Supper.[35] This small church was tightly connected by means of family and household bonds, and likely took some time to grow into the community of thirty-five members that was recorded in 1673. In the church book, the preserved copy of which was prepared in 1723, the list of congregants begins with Charles Fleetwood and his wife, the former Bridget Cromwell, followed by Smith Fleetwood and Lady Hartopp, both children from Fleetwood's first marriage, along with Lady Hartopp's husband, Sir John Hartopp. It also includes Colonel Berry and his wife, Colonel John Desborough, Colonel Ellistone, and a Captain Lloyd.[36] In the mind of the early eighteenth-century scribe, at least, there was no disguising that this was a meeting of old republicans who had taken leading roles in the events of the Revolution. For the first time, perhaps, Owen was preaching to a group of trusted friends, with personal bonds that stretched over decades, as they worked together to

[32] Gribben, *John Owen*, 218–23.
[33] Gribben, *John Owen*, 226, 244.
[34] Gribben, *John Owen*, 226–8, 258.
[35] Several of these notebooks are available at DWL: NCL L6/2, L6/3, L6/4.
[36] T. G. Crippen (ed.), 'Dr Watts's Church-Book', *TCHS*, 1 (1901–4), 26–38 (26–7). The extant Bury St. church records are held at CL: MS II.a.15.

0004263782.INDD 130 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

sustain something of the vision for a reformation of church and state that had driven their earlier activity.

Owen seems directly to have addressed the need for continuity with this earlier work. One undated sermon preached to this congregation, entitled 'The Furnace of Divine Wrath', replicated material that Owen had published in *Of the Mortification of Sinne in Believers* (1656).[37] But his preaching began to differ from his more recent publications. After all, in addressing these old friends, Owen could now speak freely, and Sir John Hartopp's notes of Owen's sermons capture ideas that he might never have committed to print. Owen's written work, much of which was still published anonymously, adopted an ironic and occasionally witty tone. Within his congregation, his preaching was urgent, earnest, and direct. It was also carefully planned, often to develop themes in his monumental commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. Alongside these occasional sermons on Hebrews, Owen tended to preach through a series of expositional or doctrinal themes. But he was ageing, and was perhaps struggling with time management as he coordinated his extraordinary literary endeavours alongside preparation for the pulpit and pastoral work. He admitted, in February 1669, that he had hoped to have 'added a word or two of direction how to put this counsel into execution, [. . .] but my strength is gone'.[38]

The strength of the churches was also in decline, and Owen mixed nostalgia with concern. In May 1670, he considered that 'we do or have lived in days wherein it hath been so far from being a shame to be counted a Christian, that it hath been a shame for a man to be counted no Christian. It hath not been the especial duty of believers to profess the gospel in general, but the common custom of all.' In those earlier days, one generation before, God had 'given a great and illustrious testimony unto the gifts and graces of the Holy Ghost—it may be as great as in any age since the time he gave extraordinary gifts to the apostles'. And their legacy continued as Christians stood up for biblical church order: 'Whatsoever violence may come upon the disciples of Christ, they had rather die than prostitute an ordinance of Christ.'[39]

But by the end of the year he had grown more pessimistic. Preaching in November 1670, Owen compared his situation to that of 'a traveller, when the sky is filled with clouds and darkness, tempests and storms, that are ready to break upon him everywhere', who 'yet remembers that these are but interpositions, and the sun is where it was; and if he can but shelter himself till the storm be over, the sun will shine out again, and its beams refresh him'. 'This is an overwhelming time', he continued, 'a time wherein many are at the ends of the earth literally, and many metaphorically', thinking in part of the Scottish Covenanters who, in the aftermath of failed rebellion, had lately been sold into

[37] Goold notes the similarity in Owen, *Works*, XVI, 424.

[38] John Owen, *Posthumous Sermons* (1854): 'The Wisdom of Making the Lord Our Refuge', in *Works*, XVI, 432–9 (439).

[39] John Owen, *Posthumous Sermons* (1721): 'The Divine Power of the Gospel', in *Works*, IX, 217–37 (224, 226–7, 233).

0004263782.INDD 131 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

slavery.[40] 'The interest of Christ and the gospel was never so fast going down in the world since it came into it, as at this day', he considered:

> When the gospel was first planted and brought into the world, the devil was not able to bring the church into its apostasy, under six, or seven, or eight hundred years, and that by degrees. Since the time of the Reformation, the church was progressive for about seventy years; it stood at a stay about the same proportion of time; and ever since, it hath been going backward, straitened in all places: the power of it decays, and the peace of it is taken away, and destruction everywhere seems to lie at the door.[41]

The need for clear preaching had become urgent: 'the best of men have need to be warned to take care of the worst of sins in the approach of the worst of times'.[42] But there was a way out. 'When all this state and frame of things shall vanish, and we prove to have an utter unconcernment in things below; when the curtain shall be turned aside, and we shall look into another world; the soul's relief lies in God's immutability,—that we shall find him the same to us in death as he was in life, and much more.'[43] The only hope, it seems, lay in the prospect of life in 'another world'.

*

Owen's outlook—and his mood—changed for the better in June 1673. With the possibility of a wider indulgence of Protestant Dissenters, Owen's small church merged with one of the more substantial London Independent congregations upon the death of its pastor, Joseph Caryl. In contrast to Owen's small congregation, Caryl's church had its own accommodation, in Leadenhall Street, and a much larger and more diverse membership of just over one hundred. While the political situation hovered uncertainly around the hope of religious freedom, Owen sought to unite the congregations into a single church. He marked the combination of congregations with a sermon on 'gospel charity': love.[44] In doing so, Owen was attempting to set the tone for the new fellowship. It is fair to say that love had not been a major theme in Owen's earlier work. Nevertheless, he now insisted that 'love is the means of communion between all the members of the mystical body of Christ, as faith is the instrument of their communion with their head, Jesus Christ.' One of the purposes of the Incarnation was to make it possible for humans to love one another. 'We neither give testimony unto the world that God sent Christ, nor evidence that we are his disciples, nor do we contribute any thing to the edification of the church', he insisted, 'unless God give us to act this grace of love in an abundant measure.'[45]

[40] John Owen, *Posthumous Sermons* (1721): 'God the Saints' Rock', in *Works*, IX, 237–56 (244, 255).
[41] John Owen, *Several Practical Cases of Conscience Resolved* (1721), 'Discourse III', in *Works*, IX, 365–8 (367).
[42] Owen, *Several Practical Cases of Conscience Resolved*, 'Discourse VIII', in *Works*, IX, 381–5 (382).
[43] Owen, 'God the Saints' Rock', in *Works*, IX, 248. [44] Gribben, *John Owen*, 248–50.
[45] John Owen, *Posthumous Sermons* (1721): 'Gospel Charity', in *Works*, IX, 256–71 (268, 258).

0004263782.INDD 132 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

Owen developed this theme at the risk of undermining some of the emphases of his earlier work: 'A church full of love, is a church well built up. I had rather see a church filled with love a thousand times, than filled with the best, the highest, and most glorious gifts and parts that any men in this world may be made partakers of.' Similarly, he continued, 'churches have been apt to place their communion too much, if not solely, in the participation of the same ordinances, depending upon the same pastor and teacher,—joining together in the celebration of the same sacred institutions. Friends,' he would warn, 'this is but the expression of our communion, and it may be without any real communion.' Churches, in other words, could be organized precisely on biblical principles and still lack a vital component. 'Some may be nearer the truth than others; some are so', he wrote, 'but if any way doth really in itself obstruct love, without farther consideration, without debating whether it was right or wrong, I would leave that way; for I know it is false.'[46]

Owen found it hard to sustain this new emphasis on gospel charity. In the context of the larger congregation, he abandoned his habit of preaching consecutive sermons through an extended biblical passage or doctrinal theme. Perhaps Caryl's old congregation had had too much of this technique: after all, it had taken Caryl decades to preach through the Old Testament book of Job.[47] Owen quickly reverted to the familiar jeremiad as to the current state and future prospects of England and of English Dissent. He could not understand why believers would consort with the culture that would destroy them. 'The great sin that is upon the nation, and which we ought to bewail, and be humbled for, is the violence they have done to God's portion', he explained in March 1674. 'And our great sin is this,—that notwithstanding all the violence that hath been showed us, all the fears, troubles, perplexities that we have undergone, yet we have not been willing to come out from among them, and be separate, but we have cleaved greatly to the unclean thing.'[48]

In January 1676 he lamented the lack of mutual concern between churches of like faith and order: 'I did little think ever to have lived to see the day wherein the churches of Christ should have so little concern in one another as they have.'[49] In November 1676 he restated his conviction that 'there was not a more glorious profession for a thousand years upon the face of the earth, than was among the professors of the last age in this nation.' English Congregationalism had, he acknowledged, been exceptional:

> We do not know that there hath been a more glorious cause of truth since the apostles' days, than what God hath committed to his church and people in this nation, for the purity of the doctrine of the truth and ordinances; but we have lost

[46] Owen, 'Gospel Charity', in *Works*, IX, 268, 266, 269.
[47] For Joseph Caryl see *ODNB*, *BDBR*.
[48] John Owen, *Posthumous Sermons* (1721): 'A Christian, God's Temple', in *Works*, IX, 285–95 (295).
[49] John Owen, *Posthumous Sermons* (1854): 'A Fast Sermon: Christian Duty under the Hidings of God's Face', in *Works*, XVI, 514–26 (519).

0004263782.INDD 133 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

> all the beauty and glory of it by this mixture in the world. I verily think it is high time that the congregations in this city, by their elders and messengers, should consult together how to put a stop to this evil, that hath lost all the glory of our profession.[50]

But it did not happen. The only significant meeting of the leaders of Dissenting congregations occurred among Calvinistic Baptists who, in 1677, adopted a confession of faith that would become the platform for their continued expansion.[51] Owen was ready to give over his 'poor, weak discourse'. 'Perilous times and seasons are come upon us'—and the Dissenting churches could not hold fast.[52] By this point, Owen was looking back upon the struggles to identify and then defend biblical church order as a lost cause. Preaching in September 1678, he remembered a time when:

> church-order was the greatest ease, the greatest relief, that a man could certainly desire or attain. I have known it. And I have lived to see church-order burdensome, that many have complained of it as the most insupportable burden. [. . .] I tell you freely, my fears are, that if we were to gather churches again, as we did thirty years ago, we should have but a small harvest.[53]

For Owen, now approaching the end of both his career and his life, the Congregational experiment appeared to have failed.

So too had Owen's preaching. In February 1680, he admitted to his listeners that 'I have now been very long, though very unprofitable, in the ministration of the word; [. . .] I am ready to faint, and give over, and to beg of the church they would think of some other person to conduct them in my room, without these disadvantages.'[54] Later that year, he reflected upon 'this dying time, especially among good ministers, one or another [dying] almost every day'. His sermons increasingly turned to the theme of death, commenting on the sudden passing of one individual with whom Owen had 'thirty years' acquaintance and friendship, and half that in church-fellowship. Owen appears to have felt this loss personally: 'The seat before my eyes is very much changed in a short time, and I know not, brethren, how soon it may be the lot of any of you to stand in need of understanding this thing and bringing it into practice.'[55]

Worse than all this, though, was the collapse of his confidence in the providentialist theology that had been so effective in explaining the triumph of the

[50] Owen, 'Perilous Times', in *Works*, IX, 329, 331.

[51] See A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1947), 104–5; White, *Baptists*, 119–20.

[52] Owen, 'Perilous Times', in *Works*, IX, 332, 334.

[53] John Owen, *Posthumous Sermons* (1854): 'The Mutual Care of Believers', in *Works*, XVI, 477–80 (479).

[54] Owen, *Several Practical Cases of Conscience Resolved*, 'Discourse XIV', in *Works*, IX, 403–5 (405).

[55] John Owen, *Posthumous Sermons* (1721): 'The Christian's Work of Daily Dying', in *Works*, IX, 334–52 (336, 341, 342).

0004263782.INDD 134 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 21/12/18, SPi

saints one generation earlier, but which no longer made sense in the context of defeat. As Owen acknowledged, 'I do not know [...] a greater rebuke, in the whole course of my ministry, than that I have been labouring in the fire to discover the causes of God's withdrawing from us without any success.'[56] By December 1681, Owen was admitting defeat: 'no man, I think, hath less of faith than I,—no man doth more despond'. The discovery of the Popish Plot gave cause for hope that God had not yet totally forsaken England. But Owen feared that the 'approaching carnival, or time of feasting'—Christmas, 1681—'will quickly blot out all impressions that ought to be in the minds of men from such a day as this is'.[57]

*

Owen's fears about the effect of Christmas festivities in 1681 concluded his official work to establish congregations of Dissenters. In a way, it signalled the realities of the battle in which he had been engaged. Across forty years, eighty publications, and countless words both published and preached, Owen had sought to identify, defend, and then distinguish the cause of orthodox Dissent. But all along, he was contesting the most foundational assumptions about the nature of the church, its public worship, and its relationship to the state. Finally, as God demonstrated his anger at England's backsliding, all of Owen's admonitions would be overcome by the population's enthusiastic celebration of one of the oldest and most established Christian festivals: a paradox that typified the relationship between John Owen, English puritanism, and the experience of Dissent.

[56] John Owen, *Posthumous Sermons* (1854): 'The Death of the Righteous', in *Works*, XVI, 488–93 (492).

[57] John Owen, 'Seasonable Words for English Protestants' (1690), in *Works*, IX, 6, 13, 15.

0004263782.INDD 135 Dictionary: NOSD 12/21/2018 12:24:30 PM