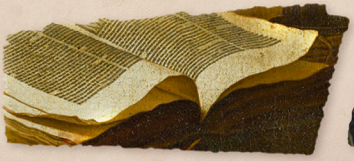
WHEN CHRISTIANS DISAGREE

Lessons from the Fractured Relationship of John Owen and Richard Baxter

TIM COOPER

Foreword by Michael A. G. Haykin



"We live in an extremely politicized and polarized age with many big personalities out in front. But this isn't exactly a new phenomenon. Tim Cooper's wonderful little book gives us realistic historical reflections that then generate relevant practical advice for us. He encourages us to look back in order that we might learn from (flawed) heroes of the past even as we seek to navigate our own (flawed) engagement in the present. This is a genuinely helpful volume."

Kelly M. Kapic, Professor of Theological Studies, Covenant College; author, *You're Only Human*

"In *When Christians Disagree*, Tim Cooper investigates the impact of personality and pride, history and hostility, and experience and environment on the tragic breakdown of peace between two giants of the Puritan movement—John Owen and Richard Baxter. Demonstrating that every believer (and pastor) has blind spots, struggles with sin, and wrestles with pride, Cooper draws practical implications for Christians striving to cultivate unity and humility in the body of Christ. The reflections of this insightful, balanced, and accessible work are invaluable for pastoral ministry, historical analysis, and practical Christian living. Above all, the failures that Cooper highlights in the lives of Owen and Baxter should encourage us to boast alone in the one perfect man—the spotless Lamb of God whose glories these men rejoiced to proclaim."

Joel R. Beeke, Chancellor and Professor of Homiletics and Systematic Theology, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

"In an age of increasing tribalism, this little book gives us an important lesson in wisdom. While well written, it is a painful read, for as Cooper describes it, it is like watching a car crash in slow motion to see the clash between Baxter and Owen, two godly but human giants of seventeenth-century English Christianity. There is much here for us to learn: the complexity of factors, prejudices, and (potentially distorting) filters that make for disagreements between Christians. May God use this volume to increase our humility and our prudence as we navigate disagreements today and strive for healthy unity in the gospel."

Michael Reeves, President and Professor of Theology, Union School of Theology, United Kingdom

"Disagreements in the family of God are rarely dispassionate affairs because they are born out of the most deeply held convictions of complex creatures. Tim Cooper masterfully illustrates this dynamic in his account of the tragic feud between John Owen and Richard Baxter. This volume represents the best kind of church history—personal, probing, and directly applicable to contemporary Christian life."

Rhyne R. Putman, Vice President of Academic Affairs, Williams Baptist University; Professor of Theology and Culture, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God*

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CROSSWAY®
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

When Christians Disagree: Lessons from the Fractured Relationship of John Owen and Richard Baxter

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

First printing 2024

Printed in the United States of America

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-9295-9
ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-9296-6
PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-9297-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cooper, Tim, 1970– author.
Title: When Christians disagree : lessons from the fractured relationship of John Owen and Richard Baxter / Tim Cooper ; foreword by Michael Haykin.
Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023032991 (print) | LCCN 2023032992 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433592959 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433592973 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433592966 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Puritans—England—History. | Owen, John, 1616–1683. | Baxter, Richard, 1615–1691. | Polarization (Social Sciences)—Religious aspects—Christianity—History.
Classification: LCC BX9334.3 .C67 2024 (print) | LCC BX9334.3 (ebook) | DDC 285/.9092242—dc23/eng/20240222
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023032991
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023032992

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Foreword

TEACHING AND READING about the history of Christianity inevitably entails significant consideration of the controversies that have divided men and women in the church: from serious conflicts such as those about Arianism and Pelagianism in the ancient church to divisions over secondary matters like the nature of church governance, baptism, and the gifts of the Spirit in more recent times. One way of reflecting on such conflicts, often found in handbooks of historical theology, has been to see such controversies as fundamentally doctrinal in origin. With the rise of social history in the past half century or so, socioeconomic factors have also been brought to bear on the explanation of these theological disputes. Both of these ways of understanding ecclesial conflict in the past—and present—are helpful. Given the complexity of human life and the human person, however, we must invariably take other, more personal factors into consideration.

In this exceptional study of the relationship of John Owen and Richard Baxter—chief among the leaders of later seventeenth-century Puritanism—such personal factors are key to understanding why they failed to work together in the face of a hostile

state church. Of course, neither of them could admit that their differences were not simply theological. But Tim Cooper shows that there was more going on in their relationship than a failure to agree on how to read and exegete the Scriptures. In doing so, he demonstrates that church history is about more than theology and biblical reflection. It involves human personalities and their deepest affections. And the failure of Owen and Baxter to get along to some degree as fellow pilgrims to the same heavenly city had dire effects for the earthly fortunes of their respective ecclesial communities.

This is a must-read for anyone who wishes to understand something of why and how Christians can fail to live up to their calling to be men and women brimful with the fruit of the Spirit. May we, in this day when Christians must be all that Christ calls us to be, learn from the failure of our older brothers in the faith.

Michael A. G. Haykin
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Introduction

NOT LONG AGO I was driving to my local supermarket when I noticed a sequence of small billboards that encouraged people to moderate the force of their online disagreements. "Tone it down," urged one message. "There is more that unites us than divides us," observed another. There can be no doubting the need for those encouragements. We seem to live in a world of increasing polarization in which the members of warring tribes address each other with remarkable vitriol in the online environment, and our disagreements show no sign of narrowing. Technology has played a large part in that development, not least the rapid emergence of social media platforms in which people use words and sentiments they would much less likely deploy if they were speaking to the other person face-to-face. We do indeed need to tone it down before our differences become unbridgeable.

So I was struck by the relevance of that billboard campaign for our current cultural, societal, and political moment. More than that, I was struck by how precisely pertinent those sentiments are to a much older story, one that unfolded nearly four centuries ago. They apply now; they applied back then. That was a world

away from the omnipresent social media we now experience, but those who lived in seventeenth-century England were coming to grips with the rapid proliferation of another new technology: printed books, which opened up enormous opportunity for one person to wound and insult another via the printed word on the page, if not the screen. So there are technological continuities between their age and ours, but far deeper than that, there are also simple human continuities. Human nature has not budged over the intervening centuries, so the kind of dynamics we see at work in the breakdown of relationships back then are mirrored in our own present-day experience. What this means, of course, is that there are lessons for us to learn in those older divisions and disagreements. This book offers a detailed account of one relationship breakdown in particular and provides ample material to help us soberly reflect on our own differences or on those differences we see played out around us.

Those of us who count ourselves among the Christian community face the unsettling reality that the kinds of disagreements we witness in society at large also occur among our Christian brothers and sisters: even the most conscientious of Christians disagree. These are men and women who are respected and trusted. God seems to have blessed their life with fruitfulness. They may well be effective leaders or communicators. At a minimum, they are brothers and sisters who have been adopted into the family of God. They may also be part of the same group or congregation within the Christian church. They read the same Bible, with all its many encouragements and injunctions for unity. And yet they disagree. They do not get along. They fall out with each other.

Chances are, we have all seen instances of this disunity or been part of a controversy that has broken out even among fellow believers. Personalities clash. Disputes over beliefs arise. Changes in church practice create winners and losers. Wounds mount up; resentments accumulate. A follower of Jesus worships him in a Sunday morning service, all the while studiously avoiding a fellow believer just a few seats away. Or tensions reach the boiling point, spilling over into outright conflict with outbursts of hurt and anger. People leave; the church divides; relationships are never repaired. It seems it has been this way from the beginning. The apostle Paul had to rebuke the Christians in Corinth for dividing into rival factions (1 Cor. 3:1–4). The subsequent history of the church right down to the present day is littered with examples of disunity, division, fragmentation, and the very things that Paul warned against: "quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder" (2 Cor. 12:20).

This is a difficult challenge to meet. Part of the problem is that we are too close, too invested in the disagreements we see around us. What we need is some distance and the objectivity to see things as they are and to discern all the different layers of what is really going on. One way of gaining that distance is by examining in detail a complex controversy we have no stake in, one that took place, in this case, nearly four hundred years ago. Richard Baxter (1615–1691) and John Owen (1616–1683) were two very important and respected leaders within seventeenth-century English Christianity. No one should doubt their godliness, their devotion to God, or their commitment to the cause of peace and unity. But they did not like each other, and we are about to see why. We will understand the multilayered reasons for their hostility and observe

how their relationship—never bright to begin with—deteriorated over the decades, finally settling into a fixed and mutual dislike. Spoiler alert: there is no happy ending. This is a classic, timeless story no doubt repeated with minor variations countless times over the centuries but in this case one for which we have ample evidence. It offers an archetype of conflict between Christians that, for all the distance between them and us, is enduringly relevant to our own day.

The fact that their story is an old one is to our advantage. We have nothing at stake in these two men, so we can observe them dispassionately and objectively. We can identify patterns and draw lessons in the hope that we can apply them to our circumstances. The four hundred years of distance help separate us from the emotion of our own entanglements. Returning to our context, we might be able to see ourselves in a more detached fashion. Ordinarily, we are too close to our own conflict to easily understand the complex, unspoken, dimly recognized layers of what is actually taking place. Whether we are one of the protagonists or a disagreement is simply taking place around us, conflict is messy. It is difficult to see things clearly. But when we step back into the seventeenth century, we silence the emotional noise. In that relative stillness, it becomes possible to make observations and draw conclusions that serve us well as we return to the twenty-first century to negotiate our own context of conflict. That is my hope with this book.

I am very aware that for most of us, seventeenth-century England is a foreign country, so I have done my best to keep the story simple and accessible. Written for a popular Christian audience, this is a much shorter version of my earlier book for a scholarly

audience, *John Owen, Richard Baxter, and the Formation of Nonconformity* (Ashgate, 2011). I am grateful to my good friend Michael Haykin for suggesting that I write a more accessible account. In this version, I have not said everything I might have said about this relationship. Anyone seeking the fuller story or more detailed evidence can consult that earlier book (I give some further guidance in the "Further Reading" section at the end of this book). When I quote from seventeenth-century sources, I have silently updated the language and grammar to a more contemporary English. In the first chapter, I have provided a brief outline of each man's life, one that emphasizes their similarities and positive qualities in a way that the subsequent chapters do not. There, the story unfolds in a little more detail. This makes some repetition inevitable in those following chapters, but I imagine the reader who is unfamiliar with the seventeenth century might appreciate the reinforcement. In the same vein, a glossary of key terms is available in the back matter if you would like to know more about what a word means. Also in the back matter is a chronology that provides a time line of events.

In putting the book together, I have been very conscious of my limitations as a historian—I am not a psychologist or a counselor, though I have been a church pastor. While I go on to offer my own reflections, I am determined to open up space for you to reflect on the story for yourself and to bring your own wisdom to bear. For that reason, I have ended each chapter (except the first) with a series of questions that you might ponder, either by yourself or in a small group. I have not given any indication of what I think the most important present-day issues of contention might be. For one thing, I do not want the book to become dated as issues

that seem urgent and pressing today begin to fade and pass, to be replaced by other issues that come to dominate our minds tomorrow. For another, I want to empower you, the reader, to apply the lessons of this story to the issues that seem most important and obvious to you. The reality is that I have no easy answers. The tale I unfold presents us with any number of important questions, and I have left open as much space as possible for you to reflect and come to your own conclusions.

Perhaps I should offer a word of warning. We are about to learn why two men came to dislike each other so intensely. Here we see Owen and Baxter in their worst light, not in their best light—indeed, they brought out the worst in each other. This is not a flattering account. John Lardas Modern has said that "the burden of church history is, among other things, the call to converse more humanely with the dead."[1] I have no wish to denigrate these two men, but I do seek to interpret them accurately and humanely. This means taking account of the ways in which they were all too human and, I hope, not writing with any hint of condescension, as if I am somehow above the fallenness they shared. The point of their story is not so much that Christians disagree but how they go about their disagreement. It is really quite remarkable that mature believers who are, in so many respects, magnificent examples of what it means to follow Jesus with faithfulness and sincerity can also be Christians with pronounced blind spots who demonstrate brittleness, selfishness, and ego in their relationships with others and who damage those around them. We are all human; we are each a mixed bag. As Martin Luther once observed, we are sinners

1 John Lardas Modern, "The Burdens of Church History," *Church History* 83, no. 4 (2014): 990.

and saints all at the same time. Baxter and Owen are not going to come out of this book looking like saints. That is just not the story I need to tell. But let me place on record the high regard I have for both men. The achievements and the example they have left behind are mightily impressive. I would not have spent my life studying them if they were not worth studying. There is much to admire, and I do admire it, but my admiration must be the focus of a different book.

I am compelled to acknowledge a group of friends and readers who generously gave their time and insight to make this book far better than I could have made it on my own: Raewyn Booth, Kelvin Gardiner, Gareth Jones, and Joseph Wingfield. I am deeply, sincerely grateful for their responses and suggestions. If you find the end result at all readable, accessible, and helpful, much of the credit goes to them.

Here, then, are these two giant leaders of the seventeenth century, warts and all. They are a lived example of how even the most godly Christians disagree and do a pretty poor job of it and how relationships break down even between the most sincere believers. I hope their conflict can help us understand and manage our own difficulties with each other so that we might, as far as we possibly can while we live in this world, all be "of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (Phil. 2:2).

1

Two Good Men

WHEN THE RICH YOUNG RULER came to Jesus with his pressing question, addressing him as "Good Teacher," Jesus responded with a question of his own: "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone" (Luke 18:18–19). This is important. Only God is good; none of us are good. We have many fine qualities, to be sure, and we retain the image of God, but we are flawed, deeply flawed. Even the best of us is shot through with human sinfulness and frailty. We are all vulnerable to blind spots and besetting sins. Our best efforts are colored by imperfection. There are no exceptions. Only God is good.

Yet the evident truth of Jesus's observation does not prevent us from saying that someone is good: "He is a good man." "She is a good woman." We know what we mean. We do not intend to convey that such a man or woman is a model of perfection, but there is something about each one that we can say is genuinely good. Within the confines of human weakness, they are doing their best. They stand out for their presence and contribution.

In these terms, John Owen and Richard Baxter were two good men. There is much to admire in their character and achievements. Even today, four centuries on, a great many contemporary Christians hold them in high esteem. In this first chapter, I want to sketch out their life story to introduce these men to you in such a way as to emphasize their many positive qualities, accomplishments, and commonalities. That is because the remaining chapters, necessarily, accentuate the negatives and draw attention to their differences. Neither man comes out of this book looking that great. While we can say that they were both good men, we must add that "no one is good except God alone."

Early Formation

Baxter and Owen had a lot in common. To begin with, they were both Puritans, which means they were deeply committed to seeing the Church of England reformed according to the prescription laid out in the pages of the New Testament. The label of "Puritan" was deployed against them as an insult. Baxter referred to it as "the odious name," and no one liked being called a Puritan.[1] They preferred to label themselves "the godly" or "the saints." The nickname comes from the word "purity": Puritans sought to purify the Church of England from anything that was a merely human innovation and to see the church return to its pure form in the age of the apostles. Over the centuries, "corruption" had crept into the church as its worship and leadership structures had become ever more elaborate and complex. For the Puritans, that corruption was embodied most comprehensively in the Roman Catholic Church.

1 Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae, or, Mr. Richard Baxter's Narrative of the Most Memorable Passages of His Life and Times*, ed. Matthew Sylvester (London, 1696), 1:2.

Inheritors of the sixteenth-century Reformation, the Puritans sought to re-create the initial simplicity of the church in its earliest and purest form. They also tried to purify the society around them, publicly attacking such sins as swearing, drunkenness, sexual immorality, and the failure to acknowledge Sunday as the Sabbath, a day of rest from work but filled for them with activity such as church services, prayer meetings, and discussions of the day's sermons. Indeed, Puritans loved their sermons. They revered the Scriptures and traveled many miles to hear them preached—and not just on Sunday. But their tendency to attack sin on a societal and national level did not endear them to their "ungodly" neighbors.

Owen and Baxter were both born into the Puritan tradition, and they were born at pretty much the same time: Baxter on Sunday, November 12, 1615; Owen sometime in 1616. Baxter was raised in the county of Shropshire, far to the west of London in the Midlands near the border with Wales. For reasons he did not explain, he lived with his maternal grandfather for the first ten years of his life before moving to live with his parents. He was an only child in a family that privileged Puritan piety. Baxter shared in that piety from an early age, persuaded that the seriousness with which his parents pursued their faith by far excelled the much more profane way of life he witnessed in the community around him. Owen, one of at least six children, was also raised in a devoutly Puritan household, in the village of Stadham (today, Stadhampton), about six miles from Oxford. His father was a deeply conscientious minister in the Church of England.

Owen received an excellent education. While young, he attended a school that met in a private home within All Saints Parish in Oxford. In 1628 he entered Queen's College, Oxford, at the

age of twelve, which was not an unusually young age to begin university study in those days. Four years later he graduated with a bachelor of arts. In 1635 he graduated with a master of arts. England's two universities (the other being Cambridge University) trained England's ministers. By the time Owen graduated with his MA, both universities were well into a period of reform led by the archbishop of Canterbury, who was also chancellor of Oxford University, William Laud. These reforms tended to pull both the Church of England and Oxford University away from its Calvinist moorings toward a style of theology and ceremony that seemed worryingly Roman Catholic to England's staunch Protestants. Unhappy with these developments, Owen left Oxford in 1637. This was no easy decision. It seems that this transition threw him into a state of depression (he withdrew from human interaction entirely "and very hardly could be induced to speak a word").[2] While its intensity lasted only around three months, the aftereffects lingered for several years.

Baxter's education took an entirely different path. He attended a few mediocre schools in his locality, but he did not go on to university. He was persuaded to take up the offer of learning under a private tutor, who, in the event, proved wholly inadequate. But he did provide the young Baxter with two things conducive to his education: plenty of books and plenty of time to read them. Thus Baxter was an autodidact (that is, he was self-taught), but we should not underestimate his intelligence or his education. If anything, his self-discipline and lifelong inclination

2 John Asty, "Memoirs of the Life of John Owen," in *A Complete Collection of the Sermons of the Reverend and Learned John Owen.* [. . .] *And to the Whole Are Prefixed Memoirs of His Life*, ed. John Asty (London: John Clark, 1721), 4.

to compensate for his lack of university training made him only more studious and industrious. He certainly never lost his early love of reading books (and writing them!). Both he and Owen possessed a formidable intelligence, and both would deploy their considerable intellectual and literary abilities in the service of God.

Indeed, both men developed a genuine, personal faith, if again in different ways. For Baxter, he discerned a deepening awareness of God's call on his life, even though still very young, but there was no single, decisive moment he could point to. "Whether sincere conversion began now, or before, or after" that season of general discernment, he said, "I was never able to this day to know."[3] Not so with Owen. While there is no doubting his grounding in the faith from an early age, what we might call a moment of conversion came sometime around 1642 as he listened to a sermon preached at Aldermanbury Church in London by an otherwise unremarkable and anonymous preacher. The text was Matthew 8:26, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" and the sermon spoke directly to Owen's condition. In the words of his early biographer, "God designed to speak peace to his soul."[4] The effects of his depression lifted, and he became firmly assured of grace and grounded in his faith.

Pastoral Ministry, Civil War, and Early Publications

Owen and Baxter entered the 1640s as sincere, thoughtful, and well-educated young men of around twenty-five years old, but they ventured into full adulthood at a time of growing national tension. After a century of rising inflation, the amount of taxation

3 Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, 1:3.

4 Asty, "Memoirs of the Life of John Owen," 5.

approved by Parliament was inadequate to fund the costs of the crown. In response, King Charles I simply bypassed Parliament to pursue other means of raising revenue that were considered by many to be illegal and unconstitutional. Among the most contentious was "ship money," a tax usually imposed on coastal towns in a time of war. In October 1634 Charles imposed ship money in a time of peace; a year later he extended the tax to inland towns. He did not summon Parliament at all from March 1629 to April 1640 in what are now called the eleven years of "personal rule," thus clamping shut one of the most important pressure valves in representing legitimate grievance against the government. During that period, Charles and his archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, also clamped down on Puritan Nonconformity in the parishes. Ministers who refused to use the Book of Common Prayer or wear the surplice (a loose vestment of white linen that many Puritans viewed as a Roman Catholic hangover) were fined, removed from office, or imprisoned. This was the decade when many Puritans fled to New England, where they could shape a church to their liking without the interference of bishops. Those who remained felt increasingly persecuted and alienated.

Worse still, in 1637 Charles and Laud attempted to impose the same kind of conformity in Scotland. Charles was king of England, Scotland, and Ireland, and ruling multiple kingdoms posed a challenge for even the very best of politicians. Charles was not the best of politicians. His attempt to impose Church of England conformity on the Church of Scotland was a disaster. In 1639 many of his Scottish subjects rebelled, and the Scottish army invaded the north of England. Now in desperate need of money to meet the incursion, Charles had no choice but to call

Parliament in April 1640. Only one month later, he dissolved what is known as the "Short Parliament," but he was forced to summon the "Long Parliament" in November 1640 after the Scots successfully invaded a second time, demanding £850 a day until the conclusion of a formal peace treaty.

With Parliament back in being, the long-pent-up flood of grievance now erupted. Charles had lost the trust of many of his people. He had imposed illegal taxation, infringed on the people's liberties, and enacted a religious policy that looked alarmingly Catholic. With a Catholic wife, Henrietta Maria of France, who kept a Catholic chapel at court in London, it was not inconceivable that England's king might reestablish Catholicism, by force if necessary. Then in October 1641, the Irish Catholics rose up in rebellion against their Protestant landlords. The rumor that Charles himself had sponsored the uprising gained broad credence. Deeply distrustful of the king, Parliament took control of the various militias organized to suppress the Irish. Charles gathered his own forces, and in October 1642, actual fighting broke out, the beginning of four years of the brutal, pervasive, and devastating English Civil War. What Parliament hoped at the beginning would be only a short campaign sufficient for compelling the king to negotiate a permanent settlement turned into four years of extended bitterness, division, and misery. Around 868,000 people died (from conflicts including not only the war in 1642–1646 but also the fighting outside England [in Scotland and Ireland] and the later periods of conflict in 1648 and 1649–1651) either in the actual violence of battle or in the disease and deprivation that followed armed soldiers around the countryside. That is a proportion of around 11 percent in a population of somewhere near 7.5 million

(in contrast, around 2.5 percent of the population died during the American Civil War).[5] The fighting took place from one end of England to the other, leaving almost no part of the country unscathed. The upheaval and devastation can only be imagined. Only when Parliament's various military forces were reforged into one "New Model Army" at the beginning of 1645 did the tide of the war turn against Charles. He finally surrendered on May 5, 1646.

These events affected the course of life for both Owen and Baxter. Owen had been ordained a deacon in December 1632 and a priest in December 1638 before serving as a private chaplain in two successive family homes, then moving to London in 1642 and facing an unknown future. There, on the back of his newfound assurance of faith, he launched his writing career, publishing *A Display of Arminianism* in 1643. Arminianism (named after the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius) is the name given to the style of doctrine then preferred by both King Charles and William Laud, one that emphasized human choice and moral responsibility in salvation over against the accent on God's choice, predestination, and election that underpinned the previously prevailing Calvinism (named after the Genevan pastor and theologian John Calvin). Owen's book relentlessly dismantled the supporting structures of Arminianism and defended Reformed orthodoxy

5 For casualties from the British Civil Wars, see Charles Carlton, *Going to the Wars: The Experience of the British Civil Wars, 1638–1651* (London: Routledge, 1992), 214. For casualties from the American Civil War, J. David Hacker notes, "The most probable number of deaths attributable to the [American] Civil War is 752,000," while the United States Census Bureau reports a population of 31,443,321 in the 1860 census. Hacker, "A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead," *Civil War History* 57, no. 4 (2011): 307; United States Census Bureau, "Decennial Census Official Publications: 1860," last modified December 16, 2021, https://www.census.gov/.

(that is, the theology of the Swiss Reformation that did much to shape the sixteenth-century Church of England after its break with Rome). Owen dedicated it to the members of the Committee for Religion in the House of Lords. They rewarded him with his first ministerial position in the parish of Fordham in the county of Essex, nearly seventy miles to the northeast of London.

Thus began seven years of pastoral ministry first at Fordham and then, from 1646, at the parish of Coggeshall. This second post involved a move of only eight miles, but Coggeshall was a much larger parish, around two thousand people on a Sunday morning, with a proud Puritan heritage. In those years he published two further works. *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* (1644) presented his thoughts on the way the church ought to be structured. *The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ* (1645) comprised two catechisms, each a series of questions and answers designed to be memorized for the understanding of basic Christian doctrine by children and adults (as a requirement for receiving Communion). This volume indicates Owen's commitment to effective and painstaking pastoral investment. In his dedication to the book, he reminded his parishioners how he had taught them publicly and "from house to house," an allusion to Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:18–35.[6] Owen's promotion to Coggeshall shows that he must have been considered a very effective pastor and preacher.

Baxter's experience of the 1640s also began with pastoral ministry. He had been ordained a deacon in 1638, completed a brief stint as a school teacher, served for a short while at Bridgnorth

6 John Owen, *The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ* (London, 1645), sig. A2v.

as an assistant to the vicar, and then in April 1641 accepted an invitation to become the preacher or "lecturer" in the parish of Kidderminster in the neighboring county of Worcestershire. There he would make his name but not before the civil war intervened and national divisions took a very personal turn. Late in the summer of 1642, he left Kidderminster for a month in the face of local opposition. His return was short lived. The threat of violence forced him out again at the end of October, driven "by the insurrection of a rabble that with clubs sought to kill me."[7]

The Midlands was Royalist territory and unsympathetic to the cause of Parliament, let alone the cause of the Puritans, and Baxter supported both. Now unsettled and homeless, Baxter sought refuge with the parliamentary garrison at the city of Coventry. He remained there for over two years, preaching to the soldiers in return for room and board. He was at that time relatively sheltered, but he could not avoid the almost daily news of disaster or death from somewhere or other as the war dragged on. In June 1645 he visited some friends in Parliament's army the day after their victory at the battle of Naseby. He was horrified by the dangerous doctrine he found circulating among his friends—dangerous because it seemed to imply that Christian believers could live as they liked and sin as much as they pleased without placing their salvation in peril. He resolved to join the army as a chaplain in the regiment of Colonel Edward Whalley. Baxter joined Whalley's soldiers as they traveled England mopping up the last sites of resistance as the war at last turned decisively in Parliament's favor. Even after Charles surrendered in May 1646, Baxter remained as

7 Baxter to Stephen Lobb, June 9 and 16, 1684, Baxter Correspondence, Dr. Williams's Library, vol. 2, fol. 93.

an army chaplain until February 1647, when his health collapsed and he very nearly died.

That crisis of ill health triggered his writing career. Expecting imminent death, he began to write what he called his "funeral sermon," presumably a gathering of his final thoughts to preach to himself. But he did not die. Instead, he kept writing, and what he initially intended as a brief sermon grew into his massive and enduring devotional work *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*. In that work, which wasn't published until 1650, Baxter encouraged his readers to emulate his practice of meditating daily on their future rest in heaven. In counterpoint to that perpetual joy, the grim horror of his civil war experience regularly intrudes on his reflection. Baxter emerged from those war years with a lingering sense of trauma, and his bestselling book was a tonic for his fellow citizens trying to make sense of a confusing and frightening world.

A second book emerged from his near-death experience, *Aphorisms of Justification*, which appeared in 1649, his first published work. As he was writing his funeral sermon, he reflected on Matthew 25, where Christ appears to judge the sheep and the goats on the basis of their works. In a moment of blinding illumination, inspiration, and clarity, a new understanding of salvation slipped into place. Baxter devised a new system that retained the Calvinist understanding of predestination and the infallible salvation of the elect alongside a central place for human responsibility. The first 10 pages of *Aphorisms of Justification* offer a ringing endorsement of Calvinist doctrine. The remaining 325 pages erect an extensive series of hedges to prevent readers from ever assuming that such doctrine means they can live as they please: repentance, obedience, and lifelong perseverance all play a part, if an infinitesimally small

one, in the salvation of every believer. Baxter's project was not well received. While *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* quickly became a devotional classic, still in print today, *Aphorisms of Justification* aroused notoriety and controversy. But that dispute was still in the future in May 1647, when Baxter returned to Kidderminster to pick up the threads of his earlier ministry, with impressive results.

The Heights of Influence

Both Owen and Baxter came into their own during the 1650s. Owen had forged important connections on a national scale, even preaching before Parliament just as Charles surrendered in late April 1646, and he preached again on January 31, 1649, the day after the execution of the king. That decisive act began the Interregnum, the time between the reigns of Charles I and Charles II, eleven years in which England remained a republic (that is, the monarchy was abolished). Owen's third sermon to Parliament in April 1649 brought him into direct contact with the foremost political figure of the Interregnum, Oliver Cromwell. Owen became one of Cromwell's chaplains and followed him first to Ireland (where Owen focused mainly on reordering Trinity College, Dublin) and then to Scotland. He also became a chaplain to the Council of State, the executive body that governed England alongside Parliament.

During the 1650s Owen was a figure of national influence in three main ways. First, he became dean of Christ Church at Oxford University in 1651 and vice-chancellor of the university in 1653, energetically pursuing a series of reforms designed ultimately to improve the quality and Reformed theology of England's ministers in training.

Second, he was one of the leading architects of a new religious settlement. He helped establish a system for approving all ministers who met raised expectations for ministry and theology and for removing those ministers who failed to meet the required standard. He also worked hard—but ultimately unsuccessfully—to gain Parliament's approval for a new doctrinal basis for the Church of England, one that identified the essential beliefs of the Christian faith and therefore set the bounds of those Christian groups who would be tolerated in an environment of expanded religious freedom. In particular, Owen was a leading figure (likely *the* leading figure) in a small group of ministers summoned to advise Parliament on a new religious settlement in late 1654. As we will see, Baxter was part of the same group.

The final main way that Owen exerted his influence was as an author. By the end of 1659, he had published thirty-four books that ranged across a number of important devotional subjects as well as issues of contemporary controversy. We might note in particular his massive *Vindiciae Evangelicae, or, The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated*. Commissioned by Parliament and published in 1655, this work attacked an emerging and alarming theological variant by the name of Socinianism. Taken from the name of an Italian theologian, Faustus Socinus, Socinianism denied many of the foundational beliefs of orthodox Christianity, such as the Trinity and the deity of Christ, and placed Christian understandings of the gospel itself in peril. Thus Owen served as England's theological heavy hitter—a nationally acknowledged defender of Christian orthodoxy brought in to demolish a worrying new heresy.

Baxter also rose to national prominence during the 1650s. By 1659 *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (first published in 1650) had

appeared in its eighth edition; it was what we would call a runaway bestseller, and by the end of the decade, he had published a total of thirty-seven books. While his controversial writings had attracted an astonishing array of critics, his more devotional and practical works were widely appreciated. As an illustration of his reach as a highly regarded author, the first book after the Bible that the missionary to the Native Americans John Eliot translated into the Massachusetts language was Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, in 1664. Across his many publications, he dealt pastorally and effectively with almost every conceivable aspect of the Christian life, charging his readers to orient their lives to the call of God and an eternal future of heavenly rest that made all the attractions of this world fade into insignificance.

Baxter built his reputation on the back of genuine credibility in pastoral ministry in his parish of Kidderminster: he turned the town around. As he later explained, when he arrived he was lucky to find even one godly family living on each street, but by the close of the 1650s, the proportions had been reversed. This success rested on a combination of excellent preaching and painstaking pastoral care. The parish had to build five extra galleries of seating just to accommodate the expanded congregation within the church building. Like all Puritans, Baxter placed a premium on preaching, and he put enormous effort into what he preached and how he preached. But he also believed that preaching in itself was not enough to bring believers to full maturity. He developed an intentional model of individual soul care in which he and his assistant would devote two whole days each week (including the evenings) to meet for one hour with every willing family in the parish once a year. In those conversations, he used a catechism to assess

the faith and understanding of each person. These sessions were in their own way minisermons, couched in the back-and-forth of everyday conversation and crafted to the particular needs of each individual. Thus, like Owen, Baxter employed a catechism for the purpose of meeting Paul's injunction to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28 to "pay careful attention . . . to all the flock." He worked tirelessly for the good of those under his care. Under his leadership, Kidderminster was steadily reformed.

His vision extended beyond just his own parish. England had a divided church. Even among Puritans, fault lines had visibly widened under the pressure of the civil war and its aftermath. After his own traumatic experience of the war, Baxter longed for order and peace, and he developed a lifelong yearning to bring Christians together in unity. He identified four main parties within the English church (Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Erastians, and Presbyterians), but he felt that the moderates within each party held similar views and, more importantly, could work together in practice even if their principles varied. He believed that if England's ministers simply got on with the work of ministry, they would be too busy to notice how their differing doctrines of church government might otherwise keep them apart. So he formed the Worcestershire Association, a network open to local parish ministers of all stripes who met monthly for the purpose of mutual edification and encouragement. In 1653 they published their agreement to work together, and similar ministerial associations sprang up in other counties. In 1656 Baxter published *The Reformed Pastor*, the second of his classic works still in print today. That book pitched his vision for pastoral ministry to the whole nation. By the end of the decade, Baxter had reason to hope that

the kind of reformation he had witnessed in Kidderminster would be replicated in thousands of other parishes across the whole country. But it was not to be. Just as he felt his dreams might be moving toward reality, they collapsed in dust and ruin.

Disappointment and Dark Times

Baxter began the year 1659 full of optimism. Oliver Cromwell, England's Lord Protector, had died a few months earlier. His son Richard was much more to Baxter's liking. He dedicated not just one but two books to the new Protector, welcoming him as a new King Solomon, whom God had kept apart from bloodshed in order to bring about national peace and prosperity (see 1 Chron. 22:6–10). Under Richard Cromwell's leadership, England was ripe for reformation along the lines of what Baxter had witnessed in Kidderminster. But the army leaders had other ideas. In April they engineered what was in effect a coup d'état, and the following month Richard resigned as Lord Protector. These events preempted months of political instability and increasing chaos that were resolved finally by the restoration of the monarchy and the return of King Charles II in May 1660. Owen would have been just as disappointed as Baxter by this reversal of fortune, though Owen occupied a different place in those events. In 1659 he was a chaplain to those leaders of the army that had brought down Richard Cromwell. For someone like Owen, who had attached so much significance and promise to what he saw as God's many great works of providence in Parliament's victory in the civil war, the Restoration presented a bewildering, confusing, and utterly dispiriting reality. Had God really worked such wonders—and now all for nothing?

Worse still, both men were on the back foot politically just as the restored bishops of the Church of England quickly surged to political dominance. Given that he had preached to Parliament the day after the execution of King Charles I, Owen owed a debt to his political connections for avoiding execution himself as others involved in the regicide met a grisly end. For Baxter and those moderate Puritans like him who hoped for a broad, inclusive, and reformed Church of England, the restored bishops gave nothing away. Parliament passed the Act of Uniformity in 1662, which required all ministers in the Church of England to agree to everything in the Book of Common Prayer, the volume that provided the liturgy used in the Church of England. No sincere Puritan could easily do that in good conscience, and around two thousand ministers lost their ministerial position. The effect was to thrust them and their families into poverty. Thus began what Baxter called "the great inundation of calamities": nearly thirty years of persecuting, at varying levels, those who sought to enact a Puritan vision for the Church of England, a vision now thoroughly repudiated by those in charge of the church.[8] Baxter would find himself in prison twice, and thousands of others were fined or imprisoned for breaches of legislation with increasingly severe penalties.

With the Restoration came a change of leadership among Puritans as one generation laid aside the burden for others like Baxter and Owen, now in their mid-forties, to pick up. These two men became, in effect, the leaders of their respective stream among the Puritans (now called Dissenters or Nonconformists).

8 Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, 2:385.

Baxter was the leading figure among the Presbyterians, those who continued to hope for a broad and inclusive Church of England that would encompass moderate Puritan sensibilities. Owen was the leading figure among the Congregationalists, those who were comfortable enough sitting outside the structure of the Church of England and who sought only toleration of their existence and freedom from legal sanction. It is not as if these two men held any sort of formal office, nor that they were alone in leading these respective streams, but it fell largely to them to shepherd those of a similar mind through difficult times and to represent their interests in crucial conversations at a national level. Baxter occupied no formal place of ministry and was careful not to fall foul of legislative requirements. He turned to writing to carry on his pastoral ministry, publishing in total around 140 books over the course of his life. Owen also continued to write, publishing over 70 books by the time of his death, and he managed to carry on an active pastoral ministry to a small congregation in London. He battled on doggedly, in print and preaching, defending the gospel and genuinely fearing not just its loss but the reimposition of Roman Catholicism in England. Both men were nothing if not faithful to the very end.

And so they died, Owen in 1683, Baxter in 1691. What we say at funerals is always in danger of overstating the positive qualities of the deceased, but even so, we catch a glimpse of these two men in the sermons preached at their funerals. David Clarkson mourned the absence of Owen's leadership: "We have lost an excellent pilot when we have most need of him, when a fierce storm is coming upon us, and I dread the consequences of it." He pleaded with God to make up their loss in light of Owen's

massive contribution: "He had extraordinary intellectuals, a clear and piercing judgment. He was a passionate lover of light and truth, and he pursued divine truth so unweariedly, through careful writing and study, that it impaired his health and strength." He lamented that "a great light has fallen, one of eminency for holiness and learning, and pastoral abilities; a pastor, a scholar, a skilful minister of the first magnitude."[9]

In a similar fashion, William Bates spoke warmly of Baxter's example, contribution, and leadership, and he reflected on his humility in the last years of his life:

> Never was a sinner more humble and debasing himself, never was a sincere believer more calm and comfortable. He acknowledged himself to be the vilest dunghill-worm (that was his usual expression) that ever went to heaven. He admired God's condescension to us, often saying, "Lord, what is man, what am I, vile worm, to the great God?" Many times he prayed, "God be merciful to me a sinner." He said, "God may justly condemn me for the best duty I ever did, and all my hopes are from the free mercy of God in Christ," which he often prayed for.[10]

Bates recalled that when someone praised Baxter for his many publications, he replied with the same humility: "I was but a pen in God's hand, and what praise is due to a pen?"[11]

9 David Clarkson, "A Funeral Sermon on the Much Lamented Death of John Owen," in *Seventeen Sermons Preached by the Late Reverend and Learned John Owen* (London, 1720), 1:71, 72, 74–75.

10 William Bates, *A Funeral Sermon for Richard Baxter*, 2nd ed. (London, 1692), 124–25.

11 Bates, *Funeral Sermon*, 125.

These were, then, in the accounts of those who knew them best, two good men. Steadfast and prodigious across the whole span of life, each one sought to serve God and his people faithfully and fittingly. And this was no easy life: the trauma of civil war, fleeting success, and decades of demanding leadership in dark times. These were good men who have earned our respect. But they were not perfect men. As you are about to find out, they had their dark side, their blind spots, their sins, flaws, and fallibilities, as we all do. More than that, for all that they had in common and for all that might have thrown them together, they did not like each other, and they did not get along. They were Christian brothers who profoundly disagreed with each other, and their disagreement contributed to the ongoing division among sincere Christians of the seventeenth century. We now turn to the story of their disagreement in the hope that with the distance we have from the seventeenth century, we can learn some lessons that might help us navigate and mitigate the divisions of our own day. May God bring light to our minds and humility to our hearts.