

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Christopher R. Smith

'Up and be Doing': The Pragmatic Puritan Eschatology of John Owen

Mr Smith did some research on John Owen at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and was then spurred on by the article on Puritan eschatology by Anthony Dallison in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY (see n. 2) to offer us this complementary study.

Introduction

Quoting Anthony à Wood to the effect that his subject was, along with John Owen, one of the 'two Atlases and Patriarchs' of Independency in England, Anthony Dallison has examined Thomas Goodwin's understanding of the 'latter-day glory' to show how this doctrine inspired him to play a prominent role in national life, providing 'a powerful motive of reformation and a glorious hope for the future.'¹ Owen, too, cherished a millennial vision, which similarly inspired his extraordinary efforts as a pastor, scholar, and educator during and after the English Revolution.²

Synopsis of Owen's Eschatological Pronouncements

Owen's millennial expectations are detailed in the series of sermons he delivered before Parliament between 1646 and 1652, which, according to Peter Toon, are 'the basic source for the ascertaining of Owen's views before 1658.'³ Owen preached there as part of an established program; English parliaments heard sermons on state occasions such as the opening of a session or an official funeral, and after 1642 there were also sermons on regular monthly fast days and on special days of humiliation or

¹ 'The Latter-Day Glory in the Thought of Thomas Goodwin,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 58/1 (1986), 53, 64.

² An excellent short study of Owen's life and accomplishments is offered by Peter Toon in *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter, 1971).

³ *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Eschatology 1600 to 1660* (Cambridge and London, 1970), 37.

thanksgiving. These became more and more frequent as the English Revolution progressed.

John F. Wilson notes that the sermons on these occasions provided for the 'articulation of a common ideology (rendered in a religious idiom) which would sustain radical activity.' Because the sermons were usually published, at Parliament's request, after delivery, they also 'amplified the broadly Puritan demands for reform of church and commonwealth.'⁴ In other words, as Hugh Trevor-Roper has observed, this preaching and publishing program gave the Puritans 'a means of co-ordination and propaganda to which [the King] had no parallel.'⁵ If expectations of 'latter-day glory' in the form of a purified society were indeed a 'powerful motive of reformation' one would expect frequent reference to this doctrine in parliamentary sermons, and in the case of John Owen, this is exactly what one finds.

Owen first preached to Parliament on April 29, 1646, while a pastor at Coggeshall (and when only thirty years old). He spoke again on January 31, 1648, the day after the execution of Charles I, prompting speculation which continues unresolved to this day as to the degree of his support for, and complicity in, the regicide. After Pride's Purge, Owen spoke seven more times to the Rump of the Long Parliament, and once to the first Protectorate parliament. While an eschatological consciousness permeates all of these discourses, the most detailed development of Owen's millennial ideas is found in three sermons in particular.

1. *The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth*

John Owen delivered *The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth* on April 19, 1649, an 'extraordinary' fast day, taking as his text Hebrews 12:26-27, 'Yet once more will I shake heaven and earth . . . that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.' 'Heaven and earth,' Owen explained, were 'the heavens of the nations . . . their political heights and glory, those forms of government which they have framed for themselves and their own interest' and 'the nations' earth . . . the multitudes of their people . . . whereby their heavens, or political heights, are supported.'⁶ What cannot be shaken is the kingdom of Christ, the

⁴ *Pulpit in Parliament: Puritanism during the English Civil Wars, 1640-1648* (Princeton, N.J., 1969), 51.

⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 61.

⁶ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen, D. D.* (New York, 1851), 8:253.

'stone cut out of the mountain without hands' described in the second chapter of Daniel.

Owen then evaluated various interpretations of the passage in Daniel to determine where and when its prophetic fulfillment could be expected. He rejected arguments in favor of earlier Syrian and Egyptian contexts to conclude, 'It must needs be the declining, divided Roman empire, shared among sundry nations, that is here intimated.' Since this was, in his view, the underlying composition of Europe, Owen was here following an interpretation that had been popular since the Middle Ages in applying Daniel's prophecy to the European nations.⁷ He could thus expect to see the prophecy fulfilled, and Christ's kingdom established, in his own day.

Owen next identified Antichrist with the papacy, again following a longstanding convention, citing as proof the Roman Church's long history of persecuting 'the saints of Jesus,' 'Wickliffites and Lollards . . . Waldenses, Albigenes, and poor men of Lyons.'⁸ He argued that in two great historical phases, from 400 to 500 A.D. and from the fall of the Merovingian dynasty in France (750 A.D.) to the Norman conquest of England, the papacy had displaced natural governments in Europe by sanctioning the claims of invaders and usurpers, in exchange for acquiescence in its schemes. 'For the present, the government of the nations . . . is purely framed for the interest of Antichrist,' Owen insisted. 'No kind of government in Europe, or line of governors, so ancient but that the beast is as old as they, and had a great influence into their constitution or establishment, to provide that it might be for his own interest.'⁹

Nevertheless, the 'shaking and translating' of these nations, through upheavals like the one England was experiencing at the time, would open the way for the kingdom of Christ. Owen cautioned that 'all this shall be transacted with . . . much obscurity and darkness, Christ not openly appearing unto carnal eyes.' It was only 'at length, having suffered the poor, deceived wretches to drink the cup prepared for them, he himself appears

⁷ *Ibid.*, 261. Peter Toon notes that 'not a lot of imagination was needed in medieval minds to equate the fourth beast [of Daniel 7] with the Roman Empire, the ten horns with the ten divisions into which the Western part of the Empire was divided, and the little horn with any person who opposed "the saints"' (*op. cit.*, 17-18). Owen's third eschatological sermon took Daniel 7 as its text; it is clear that he was following this popular tradition in making his political applications in all three sermons.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 264.

gloriously . . . to the total destruction of the residue of opposers.' 'And,' Owen concluded confidently, 'that this will be the utmost close of that dispensation wherein now he walketh, I no way doubt.'¹⁰

The message for his parliamentary listeners was to appreciate the cosmic dimensions of the conflict surrounding them and make sure they were on the right side—that of the one whose kingdom was currently in opposition to all the political rulers of Europe! For they could have confidence in the ultimate triumph of their cause: "The first shaking of this nation shook [its "political heavens"] utterly to the ground. If others also tremble like an aspen leaf . . . wonder not at that neither . . . Babylon shall fall . . . and the kingdoms become the kingdoms of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹¹

Oliver Cromwell, as a Member of Parliament, was among those present for this sermon. Its motivational power was such that he immediately sought Owen out and persuaded him to serve as chaplain on his upcoming Irish expedition!

2. *The Advantage of the Kingdom of Christ*

Owen expanded on this apocalyptic vision two and a half years later in *The Advantage of the Kingdom of Christ in the Shaking of the Kingdoms of the World*, preached two and half years later on October 24, 1651, a day of thanksgiving for the victory over the Scots at Worcester. Owen's text this time was Ezekiel 17:24, in which the Lord exalts the 'low' and 'dry' tree but brings down the 'high' and 'green' tree. He explained that these trees corresponded, respectively, to the easily-overlooked things of the spiritual kingdom and 'the things of the most glorious appearance in the world . . . a mighty monarchy, a triumphing prelacy, a thriving conformity [established church].'¹²

Owen then turned to the Olivet discourse and the book of Revelation to define 'three principal seasons' in which the Lord would use 'dreadful providential alterations' to exalt the lowly trees and bring down the 'high, green' ones that exalted themselves. These were the coming of Christ as the Jewish Messiah, the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles, and 'the coming of the Lord Christ to recover his people from antichristian idolatry and oppression.' This last season was described by the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 278–79.

¹² *Ibid.*, 319.

images of war in Revelation 17 and the pouring out of wrath in chapter 19, Owen noted, and corresponded to his own day: 'This I say then, is the work that the Lord hath now in hand.'¹³

God's program was once more described as in Owen's previous eschatological sermon: 'Most nations in their civil constitution lie out of order for the bringing in of the interest of Christ;—they must be shaken up and new disposed of.'¹⁴ Speaking on a day of thanksgiving for military victory, Owen called to mind past and present evidences of how this had already been taking place in England: 'A monarchy of some hundred years' continuance . . . wholly degenerated into tyranny, destroyed, pulled down . . . a great and mighty potentate . . . brought to punishment for blood . . . a nation (that of Scotland) engaging for and against the same cause . . . totally broken.'¹⁵ He charged the parliament, the army, and all of England to persevere in their political and military program until 'we who were not a people at all may be a people to the praise of the God of all; that you who rule over men may be just . . . that we who are under rule may sit under our vines and fig trees . . . labouring to carry on the kingdom of the Prince of Peace.'¹⁶

3. *Christ's Kingdom and the Magistrate's Power*

The outlook was not nearly so positive on October 13, 1652, a day of 'solemn humiliation' called because of the Dutch War and the need for a constitutional settlement, when parliament once again called upon John Owen to preach. Taking Daniel 7:15–16 as his text, he spoke on *Christ's Kingdom and the Magistrate's Power*.

Owen first considered various understandings of the meaning of Christ's kingdom. He noted that there was general agreement that it consisted at least in Christ's rule over spirits and the souls of men, his headship of the church and his power of final, universal judgement. Owen then admitted that there were differences of opinion as to 'whether over and beyond all these the Lord Christ shall not bear an outward, visible, glorious rule, . . . whether it shall be clearly distinct from the rule he now bears in the world, or only differenced by more glorious degrees and manifestations of his power.'¹⁷

Owen himself seems to have been closer to the latter view, but

¹³ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 321.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 325.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 339.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 373.

he did not argue for it against other ideas here. Instead, he returned to a familiar theme to insist that, whether Christ was personally present on earth or not, 'All nations whatever, which in their present state and government . . . oppose the Lord Christ . . . shall be shaken, broken, translated, and turned off their old foundations and constitutions.'¹⁸ Once more Owen suggested that the properly informed Christian response, even at moments such as the one that had prompted the call for a 'solemn humiliation,' was faith and perseverance: 'When God makes known the interpretations of things, it will quiet your spirits.'¹⁹ Owen concluded with a plea for Parliament to further the preaching of the gospel in England, arguing that it was to this end that England's previously repressive government had been so profoundly altered in their lifetimes.

An examination of Owen's parliamentary sermons, then, particularly these three in which his eschatological views were expounded in detail, supports the thesis that expectations of 'latter-day glory' were a powerful and sustaining motive for the reform efforts of English Puritans. Indeed, through Owen's preaching this influence was made direct and explicit. But beyond the historical interest these sermons hold, they are also instructive as a model for how to conduct a notoriously inexact but vitally important exercise: thinking about the end of the world.

The present applicability of Owen's eschatology might not be readily apparent at first. Although it would not have been known as such in the seventeenth century,²⁰ his thought would have to be termed 'post-millennial' according to current categories—a position much less widely favored in our own day. In addition, his suggestion that specific biblical prophecies were having their final, ultimate fulfillment in the national and international events of the seventeenth century provides healthy amusement three centuries later (although we need hardly speculate as to how twentieth-century apocalyptic scenarios will be regarded in years to come!).

Indeed, if we *were* to engage in such speculation, it would underscore the realization that eschatology is a necessarily inexact, though necessary, discipline. And it is in this light that

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 374.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 378. The entire quotation is italicized in the text.

²⁰ Wilson observes that thinkers of the day were 'not encumbered by doctrinaire distinctions between post- and pre-millenarianism—a theological dispute more pronounced during the nineteenth century than during the seventeenth.' *Op. cit.*, 212.

Owen's genius shines forth. Even in his most expansive pronouncements, his temperance, moderation and pragmatism set him apart from other millennialists of the period. These qualities give his eschatological sermons specific characteristics worthy of emulation today, by those who, like Owen, strive to cultivate an overarching view of God's plan for human history which will inspire active engagement with society.

Distinguishing Characteristics of Owen's Eschatology

1. Irenic Spirit

A modern reader of Owen's parliamentary sermons is impressed first by the fact that while his eschatology is very specific (sometimes embarrassingly so), it is, nevertheless, not polemical. Owen models the proper irenic spirit of inquiry into dark matters: even while formulating his own system to answer vital social and religious questions, he acknowledges and respects the views of others.

As we have seen, Owen noted in *Christ's Kingdom and the Magistrate's Power* that there was a diversity of views regarding Christ's visible reign. (He observed, in fact, that on this subject, 'endless and irreconcilable are the contests of those that profess his name'²¹) His solution was to limit his dogmatism on the definition of Christ's kingdom to those matters on which 'those who with any simplicity profess the name of Christ, do generally agree:' his internal and spiritual rule over spirits and souls, his headship of the church, and his judicial authority. Regarding Christ's *visible* kingdom, he would only insist on this involving individuals being able to enjoy 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost,' and a restructuring of civic institutions around the world, allowing the church to prosper. Similar definitions were used in *The Shaking and Translating* and *The Advantage of the Kingdom of Christ*.²² In showing such restraint on this subject, he was emulating a predecessor like Joseph Mede more than a contemporary like Thomas Goodwin, who expounded his understanding of the actual character of the church during the millennium in some detail.²³

If Owen was not dogmatic about definitions of eschatological concepts like the millennial kingdom, neither was he dogmatic

²¹ Owen, *op. cit.*, 8:373.

²² *Ibid.*, 259, 334, 370-77.

²³ Dallison, *op. cit.*, 62-64.

about dates, chronologies, and timetables, again unlike many of his contemporaries. Numerous seventeenth-century visionaries made specific predictions, putting the world's end at a variety of dates; chief among them, irresistibly, was 1666.²⁴ Lloyd Glyn Williams holds that, during the Revolution, Owen too was enamored with 'chronologies and computations,' only to become disillusioned with them after the Restoration.²⁵ However, it is important to recognize the context of the remark Williams cites from *The Shaking and Translating*: 'chronologies and computations . . . have their use.'

Owen had been addressing the question of the 'signs of the times,' and had cited as principles that God's work in the world should be looked for when 'new light' (doctrinal insight) was given to his people, when there was a sense of expectancy in the church, and so forth. He then concluded, 'And thus, without leading you about by chronologies and computations (which yet have their use . . .), I have a little discovered unto you some *rules* . . .' (emphasis mine).²⁶ Owen's statement, then, balances a recognition that 'computations' can be used to 'lead people about' with an unwillingness to condemn them completely. But he is most interested in *principles* ('rules'), not date-setting.

Other statements suggest that Owen never really was eager to delve in depth into eschatological dates and details. 'For the [specifics of the] personal reign of the Lord Jesus on earth,' he had insisted earlier in *The Shaking and Translating*, 'I leave it to those with whose discoveries I am not, and curiosities I would not be, acquainted.'²⁷ He spoke with concern in *Christ's Kingdom and the Magistrate's Power* of those who 'have been so dazzled with gazing after temporal glory, that the kingdom which comes not by observation hath been vile in their eyes.'²⁸

Owen's concern, then, was that Christians do the work which lay obviously before them. If he dismissed the specific eschatological scenarios of others in his day, it was not to substitute his own, but to appeal, as we have seen, for concerted action on that on which 'those who with any simplicity profess the name of Christ, do generally agree.' Thus, in a day when some churches and even denominations are making minor eschatological specifics a test of fellowship, Owen still provides a worthy

²⁴ Toon, *op. cit.*, 71.

²⁵ Lloyd Glyn Williams, 'Digitus Dei: God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen' (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1981), 33, 221.

²⁶ Owen, *op. cit.*, 8:273-76.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 373.

example of reason, restraint, and respect for other views, subordinating speculative ideas to the importance of unity and co-operation.

2. Freedom from Nationalism

A second feature of Owen's eschatology which was a genuine triumph over the prevailing sentiment in seventeenth-century England was its freedom from nationalistic accretions. William Haller has illustrated in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation* that in the Puritan period, 'among the English generally, apocalyptic urgings . . . led not to the pursuit of a millennium but to the aspiration after nationality.'²⁹ Similarly, John F. Wilson notes that in the period, 'millennarianism melded with mythologies of English history, taking on nationalistic overtones.'³⁰

John Owen certainly conceived of salvation and judgement in corporate, national terms as well as individual ones. His eschatological sermons do repeat some of the national myths current in his country at the time. Nevertheless, he avoided and even critiqued efforts to equate the nation of England with the kingdom of Christ. 'Say not . . . this or that suits the interests of England,' he warned in *The Shaking and Translating*, 'but look what suits the interest of Christ.'³¹ In other words, Owen's eschatology was national without being nationalistic.

Owen believed, as did most Englishmen versed in the literature of the day, that his country had played a special, specific role in church and salvation history. In his first sermon to Parliament, Owen showed currency in the then-popular story of King Lucius Polydore: 'In the very morning of the gospel, the Sun of righteousness shone upon this land; and they say the first potentate on the earth that owned it was in Britain.'³² He also seems to have subscribed to the notion of the 'Norman yoke,' that is, the idea that the English nobility, as descendants of the Norman conquerors, were perpetuating a denial of previously-existing liberties. In *The Shaking and Translating*, Owen spoke of 'the conquest of England by the Normans' as something 'the pope had a hand in,' and complained that the '*mitred-confirmations of sword-purchases*' had brought the nation 'into subjection to his Babylonish usurpations.'³³

²⁹ (Worcester and London, 1963), 62.

³⁰ Wilson, *op. cit.*, 221.

³¹ Owen, *op. cit.*, 8:278.

³² *Ibid.*, 26.

³³ *Ibid.*, 265-66.

But if Owen appropriated the prevailing national self-consciousness to the degree where he could declare, 'For the present, the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of England,' it led him only to a recognition of God's corporate, as well as individual, expectations: 'If now England has received more culture [cultivation] from God than other nations, there is more fruit expected.'³⁴ Consequently he pleaded for Parliament to support gospel preaching throughout the land, to bring about the national righteousness God desired.

Owen categorically rejected the automatic equation of a particular political or military success with the building of God's kingdom. In *The Advantage of the Kingdom of Christ* he warned,

There are great and mighty works in hand . . . tyrants are punished . . . and, we hope, governors set up that may be 'just, ruling in the fear of God . . .' . . . but yet . . . should [these works] not be brought into immediate subserviency to the kingdom of the Lord Jesus,—the Lord will quickly distinguish between them and his own peculiar design.³⁵

In *Christ's Kingdom and the Magistrate's Power*, he put the matter even more bluntly. Until God himself brought about certain world-wide occurrences such as the conversion of the Jews and the purification of religion, 'To dream of setting up an outward, glorious, visible kingdom of Christ . . . in England, is but an ungrounded presumption.'³⁶

Nor would Owen countenance an international crusade or 'holy war.' 'I speak not with respect of any engagements of war with foreign nations,' he insisted in *The Advantage of the Kingdom*. 'What have I to do with things that are above me? You will find enough work for your zeal to the kingdom of Christ at home.'³⁷

Owen's zeal certainly found 'enough work . . . at home.' He believed that God was doing something special in his country, but even so, he never considered England to be a 'holy nation' in the sense that Israel had been in the Old Testament. Rather, he saw God's 'Zion' as 'his church,' and was adamant that 'the founding of Zion does not consist in this or that form of the civil administration of human affairs.'³⁸ He worked for 'Zion' by dedicating his life to expanding the preaching of the gospel and to

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 318.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 376.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 322.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 404, 421.

training godly ministers. The governmental measures he advocated were to promote these ends, not to build an earthly utopia.

Owen's perspective and priorities are important to emulate in our own day, when nationalistic millennialism is still alive and well. Consider, for example, the statement made in a book published in the United States just over ten years ago:

In the virgin wilderness of America, God was making His most significant attempt since ancient Israel to create a new Israel . . . A new Jerusalem, a model of the Kingdom of Christ on earth—we Americans were intended to be living proof to the rest of the world that it *was* possible to live a life together which reflected the Two Great Commandments and put God and others ahead of self.³⁹

While it would, of course, be wonderful if Americans (or the citizens of any other country, for that matter) were to do just this, there are serious dangers in the view that God treats any nation today the way he treated ancient Israel, as his kingdom on earth.

3. Positive View of the Church

The alternative is to believe, with Owen, that God is 'setting up . . . this kingdom of Christ . . . and planting it in the church.'⁴⁰ As has already been noted, one of the few characteristics of Christ's *visible* kingdom to which Owen would commit himself was the presence on earth of a glorious, purified church. Owen, as we know, believed Christ's millennial rule would probably be through the church, rather than in person. He thus took the business of religious reform and religious freedom very seriously: 'fulness of peace unto the gospel and to the professors thereof'⁴¹ was an essential aspect of the millennial kingdom as he understood it.

His example is instructive. Many today may believe more strongly than Owen did in a visible appearing of Christ to establish his kingdom, but no one should, for this reason, believe any less strongly than Owen in the importance of building a pure, glorious church and setting it at liberty. Much contemporary eschatological thought, initially developed at a time when many despaired of reforming the church, often has the effect of reducing it to a minor 'parenthesis' in redemptive history. It is not. 'Whatever will be more,' as Owen would say, the church is the

³⁹ Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory* (Old Tappan, N.J., 1977), 22–23.

⁴⁰ Owen, *op. cit.*, 8:317.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 334.

centerpiece of God's redemptive work right now, deserving and requiring every investment one can make in it. Owen's eschatology maintained a very high view of the church; so must ours.

4. *Meaning in History*

A fourth exemplary characteristic of John Owen's thought is the way it affirmed, and thus gave meaning to, the world-historical process. If it is indeed true that the kingdom of God will not be realized on earth through this process, but that divine intervention will ultimately be required, what significance, if any, can participation in the historical process have? Owen answered this question by asserting that, even though God's kingdom will not come purely *through* the world-historical process, neither will it come purely *without* it, either. Owen believed that the stage for Christ's coming had to be set within history, and that he would not return until it had.

This view is evident in a memorable passage from *Christ's Kingdom and the Magistrate's Power*: 'The Jews not called, Antichrist not destroyed, the nations of the world generally wrapped up in idolatry . . . will the Lord Christ leave the world in this state, and set up his kingdom here [in England] on a molehill?⁴² In other words, if Christ *were* to come to earth in person, where would he reign? Where would his sovereignty be acknowledged? A king would not establish his throne in a new possession until it had been subdued; nor would Christ on earth, in Owen's mind.

Significantly, Owen saw the world-historical process as the means through which this subjugation was to be accomplished. The 'shaking and translating' of earthly kingdoms was itself necessarily preparing the way for the heavenly kingdom:

As if the Lord should say, There is a great noise in the world about setting up and plucking down of kings . . . and many of you see nothing else . . . but I also have my work in hand; my design is not bounded within these limits and outward appearances; I am setting up a king that shall have another manner of dominion and rule than these worms of the earth.⁴³

⁴² *Ibid.*, 376. The postmillennial article in the *Savoy Declaration*, written six years later, bears such a strong resemblance to this passage that one must posit Owen as the common author or influence: 'We expect that in the latter days Antichrist being destroyed, the Jews called, and the adversaries of his dear Son being broken, the churches of Christ . . . shall enjoy in this world a more quiet, peaceable and glorious condition' (Chapter XXVI).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 317.

Not coincidentally, this passage is from the sermon whose title encapsulates Owen's understanding of the purpose of the world-historical process, *The Advantage [Furthering] of the Kingdom of Christ in the Shaking of the Kingdoms of the World*.

Like many in his day, Owen expected in the millennial kingdom not 'a radical transformation of heaven and earth' but 'continuity with preceding history.'⁴⁴ Williams argues that this enabled him to 'work constructively on present projects without expecting them immediately to reach ideal proportions.'⁴⁵ It might be sufficiently instructive for many modern audiences merely to specify that this enabled him to work constructively in the present, period. It is hard to imagine that he would have worked in the Puritan movement with such zeal if he had seen a radical disjuncture between the historical process and God's work in bringing about its ultimate consummation.

Even those today who insist that the consummation of history will come only by divine intervention still teach that this will be in the midst of a desperate conflict between good and evil. Owen's view of the historical process as necessarily setting the stage for intervention offers as an operative eschatological principle 'No conflict, no consummation.'⁷ This can invest contemporary efforts in the struggle for righteousness with the same transcendent sense of purpose and urgency that motivated Owen.

5. Validity of Present Vocations

Finally, Owen's eschatological thought also upholds the sanctity of work, of human vocations. The tendency he counters, merely to sit back and wait for the end of the world when it is believed to be imminent, is as old as the doctrine of the parousia itself. (This is the context of Paul's well-known admonition in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 that 'he who will not work shall not eat,' for example.)

Owen was constantly pushing his hearers to concrete action in response to eschatological truth. In *Christ's Kingdom and the Magistrate's Power*, recalling the disciples in Acts 1 who were told to stop gazing up at the heavens after Christ, he charged, 'Take you his answer, and be contented with it, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons . . ."—but do your work faithfully.'⁴⁶ In *The Advantage of the Kingdom*, a thanksgiving sermon, Owen concluded, 'I know no better way of praising God

⁴⁴ Wilson, *op. cit.*, 217.

⁴⁵ Williams, *op. cit.*, 47.

⁴⁶ Owen, *op. cit.*, 8:386.

for any work, than the finding out of his design therein, and closing [i.e., joining] with him in it.⁴⁷ The prophet Daniel exemplified Owen's idealized response to apocalyptic revelation: 'having received what light God was willing to communicate to him, he inquires no farther, but addresses himself to his own duty.'⁴⁸

This 'duty,' for Owen as for all Puritans, meant specifically the vocation or special calling God placed every person in. Everyone in England, not just the Parliament or the army, needed to work faithfully at his or her post. 'Continue steadfast in helping [Christ] against the might,' he exhorted in *The Advantage of the Kingdom*. 'I speak not only to you who are in authority, nor unto you to whom the sword is girded . . . we have every one our mite that we may cast into this treasury.'⁴⁹

Owen's eschatology, because it affirmed the historical process, did not admit distinctions between so-called 'sacred' and 'secular' worlds or vocations. He would thus have been startled if he had been present a few years ago when a speaker was introduced to a religious audience as a former Member of Parliament who had left office to pursue a 'higher' calling as a minister. Owen could not have considered the former employment spiritually inferior. Indeed, the classic Owenian exhortation, 'Up and be doing, ye that are about the work of the Lord'⁵⁰ was addressed to a crowd of parliamentarians and soldiers, not a conference of clergy.

Owen's own life illustrates how seriously he always took his own professional responsibilities. During his career as Vice-Chancellor at Oxford, for example, he was careful to build up the endowment, the quality of the faculty, and the standards of student deportment. He reckoned up his achievements for himself upon leaving his post in order to be satisfied that he had performed his work faithfully.

It is important to recognize that Owen felt he was 'helping Christ against the mighty' even when an administrator at Oxford. His motivation in working to reverse the decline of the school was, in a word, eschatological. Sound educational institutions would ensure a learned ministry and thus a vital church, which in turn would spread the reign of Christ over the earth, setting the stage for the consummation of the ages. In Owen's view, the faithful performance of life's duties by any Christian, whether a

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 321.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 377.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 334.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

parliamentarian or a simple laborer, would also help in some way to bring in the kingdom.

Owen's teachings—and example—should dispel any far-flung eschatological notions that might lead one to abandon or neglect a productive vocation, or to see some forms of work as more 'spiritual' than others. There is never cause to flee to the hills in white robes, Owen would insist: 'you will find enough work for your zeal . . . at home.'

Conclusion

Reinhold Niebuhr has observed that 'wherever religion concerns itself with the problems of society, it always gives birth to some kind of millennial hope . . . and courage is maintained to continue in the effort to redeem society.' 'The courage is needed,' Niebuhr notes, 'for the task of building a just society seems always to be a hopeless one when only present realities and immediate possibilities are envisaged.' But he also cautions that such a millennial vision is 'dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticism,' and stresses that it must be tempered by reason.⁵¹

'Religion was the idiom in which the men of the seventeenth century thought,'⁵² so in that time of upheaval it was necessary to steer a careful course. One who navigated safely throughout his life was John Owen.

Owen was indeed inspired by a millennial vision, which motivated him to extraordinary efforts and impressive achievements. But at the same time, as Williams has observed, he 'held certain visionary and conservative ideas in a kind of creative tension.' While 'dedicated to reform,' he always 'wanted to proceed at the rate . . . God . . . made possible at that time.'⁵³

Owen's moderation and zeal can be an example to those who, in our own day, are inspired by faith to address the problems of society. Though he contemplated the end of the world over three hundred years ago, the principles he followed in doing so, and the inspiration he thus found and offered, endure as standards today.

⁵¹ *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, 1932), 61, 277.

⁵² Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: The English Revolution of the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1974), 29.

⁵³ Williams, *op. cit.*, 1.