

The Prerequisite to Theological Education According to John Owen

By Rev. Charles Bradley

John Owen is sometimes referred to as “the greatest British theologian of all time.” He lived in England in the seventeenth century when Puritanism was at its height, dying at the age of sixty-seven in 1683. He was a profound and prolific writer. Such was his influence that many of his works continue to be reprinted to this day.

Some might raise the question, “Why consider the thoughts of one so distant from the contemporary scene in theological education anyway?” There is an important reason for taking what Owen has to say seriously: There is a growing rift and separation between theologians and ministers in the pastorate. Theology, in practice, is more and more the province of the seminary and classroom and less and less that of the pastor in a local church. John Owen, in contrast, was both theologian and pastor. Further, he is typical of those Reformers both on the Continent and in England who, as Merle d’Aubigné observed, “. . . always combined learned pursuits with their practical labours: these labours were their end, their studies were but the means” [*History of the Reformation*, 2:362]. Much of the tragic waste and weakness in the contemporary church can be traced to the divorce of theology and practical ministry. It seems only logical to return and examine what was essential to theological education in the minds of the great Reformation pastor-theologians--of whom Owen is a notable example. Perhaps such an examination will provide a needed corrective.

Before one can understand Owen’s essential prerequisite for theological education, he must become familiar with Owen’s position pertaining to the goals of theological education. For Owen, the pursuit of knowledge had for its goal and primary purpose, first “to live acceptably before God” [*Biblical Theology* 668] and, second, “the cultivation of a most holy and sweet communion with God, wherein lies the true happiness of mankind” [*BT* 618]. That he held this purpose as foundational to theological study goes without saying. He expected ministers to be affected by the word of God at the personal level in advance of their public ministry. Only then did he consider men qualified to pursue the development of skill and ability in the practical areas of service [*Works* 9:455-463].

One thing stands out clearly in the writings of Owen: Neither theology, nor practical ministry, nor the education process were ever to serve as ends in themselves. His goal was always that the glory of God be displayed through the life of the minister-student, and that the presence of God be manifest in his life and ministry. Both of these are derived from communion with God at the personal level. It is an understatement to say that modern paradigms of theological education, with their emphases on processes and results, do not edify the minister-student or enhance his own relationship with God. One only has to look at the level of frustration and disappointment experienced by ministers to realize that Owen’s goal is not currently esteemed, and is rarely achieved.

At this point many readers might be tempted to stop reading. To the modern mind, Owen's essential prerequisite to a theological education is simple to the point of absurdity: The student of theology must be thoroughly converted to Christ. However, only in recent church history has conversion to Christ become the matter-of-fact affair that it is now. In times of revival and genuine reformation, that which the modern church takes as a given (that salvation is a quick and easy affair) is the central element in the life of the church. This was certainly true of Owen's day. The conversion of the soul was of vital importance.

To fail to examine the question of the need for regeneration in theological education is to do little more than admit that a genuine reformation of the church is not worth pursuing. Perhaps we should listen to what Owen has to say.

First, Owen asserts that the discipline of theology is unique. It is unlike the natural science in that it is founded not upon observation, but rather upon the revelation of God in the Scriptures. The theologian must of necessity be a student of "the book." Yet, in Owen's mind, the mere acknowledgment of the authority and truth of the Scriptures is not enough to ensure success in the pursuit of theology. The Bible cannot be approached in the same way that scholars in other disciplines sound out the texts related to their fields. To Owen, the reason is simple enough: The Bible is God's book, revealing truth that can be discovered in no other way but by his revelation. The truths of Scripture cover the most important subjects that can occupy the thoughts of man: God's character, the sinfulness of man, human inability, and the glorious work of redemption in Christ. For Owen, the Scriptures are to be approached with the same reverence due to God Himself, for there God has spoken. Students of theology must therefore understand that the nature of the Scriptures demands more than unassisted human reason can supply. This must be understood and remedied before any benefit can be had in their study. In making this point Owen exclaimed, "Oh, may God open the eyes of scholars to see that the issues of theology are totally different from the aims of philosophy, and that its study necessitates a different attitude of mind, another disposition of character, a new heart, than those with which they have been accustomed to approach the whole "round of human learning!" He also asserted that "no one can grasp or rightly understand evangelical theology by human power or reliance on intellect, apply what outside assistance he will . . ." [BT 592].

So for Owen, theology cannot be a strictly human endeavor. Neither God nor the Scriptures can be studied in the same way that a biologist, for instance, approaches a dissection. The student of theology must have a different attitude toward his subject--a different mind; for his is the noblest of pursuits. His field of endeavor demands more than what he is capable of doing. His subject commands respect and adoration. His method insists on a new heart and rigorous discipline. His purpose is not so much to catalogue and classify; but to become a worshipper and servant. Just as God is the source of Scripture, He also is the source of the regenerate heart. The minister-student must recognize this and respond by consecrating his life in order to achieve this goal. With these things in view, it comes as no surprise that Owen dogmatically asserts that God must be an active participant in the study of theology; and without His participation, nothing of lasting significance will be gained. He remarked, "For my part, if I bring to this study any understanding which God has graciously pleased to grant me, and if He blessed my purpose and prayer for it, and by my labours the godly are benefited, then I shall regard that as among the many blessings that I have received from sovereign grace alone" [BT 592]. The essential thing for theological study is that

the person embarking on such a pursuit be thoroughly born again “in a saving and beneficial way.” The necessary corollary to the regeneration of the student is that those teaching theology must also be recipients of a renewed heart before they can take the title of theologian to themselves in the full and appropriate sense of the word. As Owen observed, “[L]et us never concede the title of theologian to any who is not a disciple of Christ, not that of Christian to any who do not, or are incapable of doing the things commanded by Christ” [BT 616].

This essential, the consideration of which is usually overlooked as a given, is important because, without it, man not only lacks the ability to understand and benefit from the Scriptures. He also is powerless to withstand the great temptation to which many theologians and theological schools succumb: to incorporate the goals and methods of other disciplines into those employed in theological education to gain the attention and respect of academics outside the church. Owen recognized this temptation toward the corruption of the study of the Scriptures as existing in the early church, citing Paul’s defense of his ministry to the Corinthian Church and his writings of Ephesians 1:8-9,17,19 and Colossians 1:27-28, 2:2, 8-9. Owen correctly identified the source of this corruption as the desire of unregenerate theologians to make their theology conform to the methods of the unregenerate, this in order to elevate theology to respectability in the world, and to gain the praise of men.

The downside of course is that the truth of the gospel is undermined by any such endeavor. Consequently, the gospel message, instead of being a clear trumpet call, assumes the form of a muddled three-way conversation understood by no one, and to which few listen. The minister-student unknowingly descends from the pure mountain air of his God and his God’s theology to wallow in the mud of religious showmanship and manipulation. There, he ends up--at best--as an empty-hearted, idle-brained technician doing his professional duty for the sake of his gods.

If John Owen were to assess theological education today, he might very well conclude that the greatest problems are not with our methods or with our institutions, but with Adam’s seldom challenged reign in both.

Rev. Charles Bradley is pastor of Hopewell Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in Culleoka, Tennessee.