

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

JOHN OWEN, THE PURITAN PASTOR, PRESENTS A BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW TO BE  
APPLIED IN THE MODERN ERA

A PROJECT  
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In his final work, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, John Owen remarks that his pilgrimage had allowed him to see a variety of evils, though “none so grievous as the public contempt of the principal mysteries of the Gospel among them that are called Christians.”<sup>1</sup> Owen desired a great reform in the church that would come from a deep contemplation on the hope that the Gospel of Jesus Christ offered. For Owen the evils he had seen and experienced proved as challenges to the church and the lost that deserved address by the foundational truth of the Gospel, the condescension of Jesus and the love it displayed.<sup>2</sup>

Though Owen did not write his theological treatises to address the modern concepts of worldviews and culture, his writings, nonetheless reflect ideas that are consistent with the worldview framework of some anthropologists. Carl Trueman insists that “Owen needs to be understood in terms of the wider ongoing Western tradition of theological and philosophical thought.”<sup>3</sup> For instance, consider the following statement by Owen that points to the importance of the affections and the teleological nature of humanity consistent with an anthropological understanding of worldview: “All things almost in all nations are filled with confusions, dangers, disorders, distresses, and troubles . . . men’s hearts failing them . . . for looking after those things which are coming on the earth.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul Hiebert emphasizes three main areas that emerge in the Scriptures underlying a biblical worldview that consist of cognitive, affective, and moral themes.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Hiebert

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<sup>1</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 332.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

<sup>3</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man, Great Theologians Series* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

identifies the importance of understanding Scripture as presenting the “story of God’s acts in creation” which emphasizes the “incarnation of Christ that guarantees the value and significance of our common humanity and ourselves as individuals.”<sup>6</sup> As will be demonstrated below, an overview of Owen’s Introduction to *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* reveals Owen’s use of the three key aspects mentioned by Hiebert. It is the premise that the entire discourse will contain the same elements throughout.

Based on the previous evidence, this paper will argue that the teaching of Owen in *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ (Meditations)* is illustrative of the themes consistent with the anthropological elements that pertain to a biblical worldview: the cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions as described by Hiebert. Based upon that conclusion, the paper will argue Owen serves as a useful and relevant apologetic tool for Christians in the twenty-first century.

### **Background**

Before examining the elements of *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ (Meditations)* and their relationship to a biblical worldview, it is important to know some of the relevant matters of the context of the life of John Owen that impact his conclusions about politics and culture. The life and teaching of John Owen must be examined according to the numerous ways he communicated about the ideas of politics and religion through the multiple facets of life in which he was engaged.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 268.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 300.

Consider the implications that the following circumstances would have had on Owen and the formation of his own personal views. In 1648, at the age of 32, Owen began his service as the chaplain for Oliver Cromwell. His service occurred during the second civil war of England.<sup>7</sup> In the same year, Parliament passed the Blasphemy Act which required the execution of any person found guilty of atheism or anti-Trinitarianism. Furthermore, attempting to gain further political influence, the Westminster Assembly and more broadly Presbyterians desired to utilize the Blasphemy Act as a means for the imprisonment of Arminians, Baptists, antinomians, and universalists.<sup>8</sup>

It was then in December of 1648 Owen was invited to preach to the judges who would preside over the trial of King Charles I. On January 30, 1649 Charles I was executed. It is not certain if Owen was present for the regicide, but what is certain is the published sermon that Owen preached to the House of Commons on January 31.<sup>9</sup> It was after this event that Owen benefited from his relationship with Oliver Cromwell, who became Lord Protector, replacing the king in leadership. Cromwell served as the Chancellor of Christ Church, Oxford, and he named Owen as the Vice-Chancellor in 1652. Owen pushed Christ Church into a season of reform, especially through a Puritan emphasis that addressed the Arminian and Anglican domination that had grown prominent in the University of Oxford.<sup>10</sup> It was in 1654 that Owen was chosen by the Visitors of Oxford, who operated much like Trustees or Regents, to be its member of parliament

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<sup>7</sup> Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 90-1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>10</sup> Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 128.

(MP). However, the House of Commons disqualified Owen on the grounds that he was clergy.<sup>11</sup> Owen's time as Dean of Christ Church (1651) and Vice-Chancellor (1652-1657) was filled with controversy as he sought to bring reform to the college at Oxford.

In 1657, Oliver Cromwell was being considered to officially take the place as the king of England. Owen intervened by writing an anonymous letter to insist that Parliament consider otherwise. Cromwell was not crowned and after his death the Restorationists placed Charles II on the throne. The monarchy imposed a period of persecution upon many church leaders from various backgrounds that included the beheading of many of Owen's friends. It is amazing that Owen himself avoided such consequences for his involvement in so many various political situations in a short period of time.

These background matters provide an important glimpse into the influence and perspectives of John Owen in a tumultuous time in England's history both in politics and religion. By knowing some of the background of Owen's own culture, the ideas of Owen will be understood to be more relevant for any culture in crisis. Furthermore, because "history unfolds in ways that are contingent on individual action and social processes," the life of John Owen offers a noteworthy and profound impact that ought to be considered as he influenced the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in ways that emphasize the person of Jesus Christ as the means for a biblical worldview.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the historical aspects of Owen's life provide a clear connection for how the Scriptures that point to Christ and the glory of Christ are useful in developing a biblical worldview in the

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<sup>11</sup> Blair Worden, *God's Instruments: Political Conduct in the England of Oliver Cromwell* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2012), 149.

<sup>12</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 48.

post-modern era. Carl Trueman acknowledges the following about Owen and the matter of cultural formation:

Perhaps the most important aspect of this intellectual background to Owen, particularly as it relates to his early intellectual and cultural formation, is the world of the University of Oxford, where he was both a student and, later, a key policy making official. Thus, the university curriculum, and Owen's own actions relative to it, are important guides to tracing out some of his attitudes to wider intellectual culture.<sup>13</sup>

### **Defining Worldview**

For this paper, the working definition of worldview is framed in anthropological terms as “the foundational cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks”<sup>14</sup> that provide a group of people the ability to shape and order their lives for living cooperatively. The definition is one that considers people in a holistic way because it “encompasses people's images or maps of the reality of all things.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the definition provides a means for addressing the underlying components and issues by which a community relates according to its ethics, values, and feelings that are observed in its behaviors.

The previous definition of worldview offers three categories to evaluate how culture is shaped. Cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions, provide answers to key questions. The dimensions are necessary because throughout history people have asked questions that pertain to the nature of the world, the purpose of humanity, the reason for evil, tumult of life, etc.<sup>16</sup> Thinkers throughout history have offered manifold answers to these questions. The three-fold categories offer a framework for evaluating the validity of those answers..

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<sup>13</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 29.

For the purpose of this paper, considering the value of worldview in and of itself is not enough. It is necessary to consider worldview with a biblical perspective as well. One might argue that this is an invalid perspective or that using the Bible as a basis for worldview is self-serving. However, it will be proven that the Bible speaks to the issues identified by the three categories in the definition. Furthermore, it will be shown that in *Meditations*, Owen unknowingly but successfully utilizes the same categories in his argument about the glory of Christ and its impact on culture.

### **The Introduction by Owen**

Owen's remarks in the introduction to *Meditations* consist of the elements that he will later expound in the main body of the work. This paper will first identify the elements found in the introduction of *Meditations* detailing the relationship of Owen's thoughts to the earlier defined themes of worldview development by Hiebert. The following analysis will identify these relationships in effort to validate the connections to Owen's work with the concepts of worldview.

### **Cognitive**

John Owen identified the value of a cognitive approach to issues during his life. Owen has been described as one of the most "learned, insightful, and influential Puritans . . . and certainly one of the most voluminous seventeenth-century writers."<sup>17</sup> Owen was at the center of debates on theology, ecclesiology, education, politics, and philosophy. In seventeenth-century England each of the areas was in tumult. Owen was active in of these spheres as a writer, parish

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<sup>17</sup> Gribben, Crawford, *An Introduction to John Owen: A Christian Vision for Every Stage of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 25.

minister, Member of Parliament (PM), Faculty at Queen's College Oxford, and dean of Christ Church Oxford. It is said that Owen "developed the ideas from which his erstwhile student John Locke would fashion the classic liberalism that lies at the heart of modern democratic culture."<sup>18</sup> The cognitive ideas of Owen permeated this period in the life of England.

### Affective

Further reflection on the life of John Owen demonstrates an understanding of the matters that drive the affections of man. In 1683 Owen wrote *Meditations* "under the shadow of death . . . as a dying testimony to the unsurpassable value and joy of living a life for the glory of Christ."<sup>19</sup> The reflections in his writings show Owen as a man who had experienced defeat at many turns in his life. One writer concluded that Owen must have "died as he had so regularly lived-in the experience of defeat."<sup>20</sup> If this conclusion of Owen is accurate, then the importance of his final work is to offer his readers instructions on how to combat the discouragements of the world. In the preface to *Meditations*, Owen, describing the plight of people and the culture, wrote:

All things almost in all nations are filled with confusions, disorders, dangers, distresses, and troubles; wars and rumors of wars do abound, with tokens of farther approaching judgments; distress of nations, with perplexity, men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on earth.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Crawford Gribben, *An Introduction to John Owen*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Barrett, Matthew and Michael A. G Haykin, *Owen on the Christian Life: Living for the Glory of God in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 33.

<sup>20</sup> Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 263.

<sup>21</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 278.



For Owen, the struggles pertained to “heathens as well as Christians”<sup>22</sup> and the solution was to find a means of comfort that would answer the needs of both groups. For Owen, the plight of man is answered by the comfort which is found in contemplation on the glory of Christ:

For we behold the glory of God himself “in the face of Jesus Christ.” He that can at all times retreat unto the contemplation of this glory, will be carried above the perplexing prevailing sense of any of these evils, of a confluence of them all.<sup>23</sup>

In his preface to *Meditations*, Owen establishes a solution that he believes is the only satisfactory means of transforming culture through individuals finding “rest unto their own souls.”<sup>24</sup> Owen insists that the “contemplation of the glory of Christ will restore and compose the mind.”<sup>25</sup> For Owen, contemplation of the glory of Christ is the means to faith, the means to understand the love of God, and the means to comfort and joy. Finally, Owen notes that the contemplation of the glory of Christ must be a present discovery in this life and is not reserved for a future manifestation in heaven. In other words, meditation on the person of Christ is the only means by which a person will discover peace and hope in the present world. For Owen, merely contemplating Christ for future and heavenly benefit is short-sighted.

### Evaluative Assumptions and Frameworks

The given definition of worldview emphasizes the evaluation of assumptions and frameworks by which one sees his life. Owen was aware of the developed framework of his contemporaries and challenged his readers to adjust their perspective in a way that would

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<sup>22</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 278.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

consider the eternal issues, rather than temporal matters alone. Consider the following statement by Owen:

And unless we can arrive unto a fixed judgment that all things here below are transitory and perishing, reaching only unto the outward man, or the body, that the best of them have nothing that is truly substantial or abiding in them, that there are other things, wherein we have an assured interest, that are incomparably better than they, and above them, it is impossible that we must spend our lives in fears, sorrows, and distractions.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Meditations and Discourse by Owen (The Body of the Work)**

#### **Cognitive**

Carl Trueman acknowledges a foremost aspect of Christianity is its doctrinal nature that shapes understanding of self, which is a cognitive matter.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Paul Hiebert identifies that for Christianity the cognitive aspect consists of beliefs. Hiebert further emphasizes the importance of doctrine in relationship to transformation and conversion, specifically a “conversion to Jesus.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in *Meditations* Owen gives priority to the cognitive aspect of Christianity and conversion by developing a strong emphasis on the doctrines of Christ. Owen focuses on several key concepts such as the glory of Christ and the importance of Christ’s condescension.

Owen begins the work with a careful examination of the importance of the glory of Christ that is based on the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus in John 17. Owen insists that beholding the glory of Christ is “one of the greatest privileges and advancements of believers.”<sup>29</sup> In contrast

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<sup>26</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 279.

<sup>27</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 404.

<sup>28</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 312.

<sup>29</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 286.

Owen suggests that “[a]ll unbelievers do in their heart call Christ ‘Ichabod,’-Where is the glory?”<sup>30</sup> For Owen, the difference between the worldviews of the Christian and the unbeliever is determined by their foundational belief and comprehension of the glory of Christ. In the following statement there is a definite sense of this conviction:

Hence we have so many cursed opinions advanced in derogation unto his glory . . . bold, irreverent inquiries of what his Person is in our religion . . . [a]nd by their answers they bring their own inquiries yet nearer unto the borders of blasphemy. Never was there an age since the name of Christians was known upon the earth, wherein there was such a direct opposition made unto the Person and glory of Christ as there is in that wherein we live.<sup>31</sup>

For Owen, the beliefs of Christianity must be emphasized and clarified, not for the sake of controversy, but for the sake of the opposition Christians would face by those who hold a different view. His focus on the cognitive aspects of Christianity is the groundwork of this final work of Owen. Thus, he sets out to expound upon this great doctrine of the glory of Christ in *Meditations*.

Owen conveys the importance of the glory of Christ and the implications of knowing that glory. Hiebert’s call for Christian transformation aligns with Owen’s emphasis on the magnitude of Christ’s glory. Owen insists that the glory of God is something that cannot be comprehended but can only be adored from the “infinite distance wherein we stand from God.”<sup>32</sup> When Owen asserts that glory of God cannot be comprehended, he is not suggesting that the glory of God cannot be experienced because of its operation and manifestation. In fact, Owen clarifies that the experience of the glory of God culminates in an individual’s salvation and their incorporation

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<sup>30</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 286.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 286-7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

into church. This is the full experience of conversion. Like Owen, Hiebert speaks of conversion as an important means by which worldviews are transformed:

Christian transformation calls for a paradigm shift in which God is known to us through Christ and replaces our selves or any other god as the center of our lives. This is a radical shift, the consequences of which take a lifetime to be completed . . . Many dissonances between this and our old worldview must be worked out.<sup>33</sup>

Though Hiebert does not mention the church in the previous statement, the accomplishment of the transforming shift from self or other god as center to that of Christ as center best happens as a convert is engaged in the life of a church. Through that life in community, a believer's former worldview can be exchanged with a biblical worldview.

Community is an undisputed factor in the development of any worldview, especially in the manner that community influences morality. Therefore, the church, as a community, needs to be a strong community that promotes the sound doctrines for its members.<sup>34</sup> The church, as a community, is a witness to the renewal of creation and the renewal of individuals. Therefore, "the kingdom-shaped community cannot be satisfied with private, isolated individuals only reconciled vertically to God."<sup>35</sup> Owen notes the importance of the relationship between Christ and the church:

There is a greater, a more intimate *conjunction*, a nearer relation, a higher mutual interest, *between Christ and the church*, than ever was or can be between any other persons or relations in the world.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 320.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 405

<sup>35</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation, Volume 1 of Cultural Liturgies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 201.

<sup>36</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 355.

Furthermore, when considering the nature of culture, it is important to note that culture is “intrinsically dialectical . . . [existing] as the interface between ideas and institutions.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the relationship of cognitive ideas, beliefs, and the institution of the church are inextricably linked. For Owen the link between beliefs and the church is inseparable and essential.

Owen addresses the areas that mark the stages of history as defined by Hiebert. The first area is the Creator/creation relationship. For Owen, the dualistic nature of the Creator/creation relationship differs from modern worldview that insists on a natural autonomy.<sup>38</sup> Owen emphasizes the cognitive aspect as he considers the Creator, the divine relationship of the Godhead in the Trinity, and the ongoing work of Christ who upholds creation. The emphasis by Owen demonstrates a worldview in contrast to the modern worldview. Owen especially focuses on the glory of Christ in creation that provides a cognitive outlook that is reasonable and causes one to consider the spiritual dimensions of God’s eternal purposes in the order of material things.<sup>39</sup> Note the following remarks by Owen that emphasize the relationship of the Godhead in creation and its order:

the whole creation in its first framing, and in its perfection, was and is, by an emanation of power and goodness from the divine nature . . . the Father . . . is said peculiarly to be the Creator of all things; yet the immediate operation in the creation was from the Son, the power and wisdom of the Father.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 34.

<sup>38</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 269.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 361

Owen goes on to address the relationship of the Holy Spirit and his work in the preservation of creation. Owen then makes an important, if not essential, conclusion about the purpose of the communications of the members of the Godhead as they together uphold creation as a means of revealing the glory of God. The revelation of the glory that Owen identifies is to be found in the work of Christ in the church. Owen refers to Christ as “a repository and treasury” of all of the virtues of the church.<sup>41</sup>

The cognitive element of worldview is not only impacted by the doctrines regarding Creator/creation, but the cognitive element is also impacted by the church itself. Trueman insists that the church is responsible for “the connection between aesthetics and her core beliefs and practices.”<sup>42</sup> Owen insists that the core beliefs and practices are rooted in “[t]hat intimate conjunction that is between Christ and the church.”<sup>43</sup> For Owen, the conjunction is a matter of the Holy Spirit accomplishing His mission within the church, via her practices. The mission consists of the working out of God’s justice that was a result of “the voluntary act of [Christ’s] will.”<sup>44</sup> The working out of justice encompasses both salvation and the pursuit of the doctrines of Christ. Owen, referring to the union between Christ and the church, emphasizes the cognitive practice of the union as a preferred wisdom when he says, “The understanding of it in its causes, effects, operations, and privileges, wherewith it is accompanied, is to be preferred above all wisdom in and of the world.”<sup>45</sup> Significantly, Owen emphasizes the church in its union with

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<sup>41</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 362.

<sup>42</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 402.

<sup>43</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 352.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 365

Christ is the superior means of wisdom, beyond that wisdom found in the world. In sum, it is a cognitive category by which Owen stresses the relationships between the knowledge of God and the wisdom it provides.

Identity in the modern worldview is often determined by individual autonomy<sup>46</sup> and is influenced by psychology, sexuality, and politics.<sup>47</sup> However in *Meditations*, Owen offers a different understanding of the identity of the individual. According to Owen, an individual discovers their identity in the church community and in who the person is in Christ:

He thus communicates himself unto us, by the *formation of a new nature*, his own nature, in us; so as that the very same spiritual nature is in him and in the church . . . the same divine nature it is that is in him and us; for, through the precious promises of the Gospel, we are made partakers of his divine nature.<sup>48</sup>

Though Owen does not employ the term “identity” in the modern sense, he does convey a new way that a believer is identified individually in Christ and in the social collective of the church.

For Owen, identity is related to the Christian being conformed into the image of Christ. Owen offers an essential perspective that impacts worldview. K. Scott Oliphint expresses, “any theological discussion worth its epistemological salt is that our understanding of the world is essentially related to our being created in the image of God.”<sup>49</sup> In his preface Owen begins by explaining the uniqueness of human nature. “Our nature, in the original constitution of it, in the persons of our first parents, was crowned with honor and dignity. The image of God, wherein it was made.”<sup>50</sup> Sin corrupted man’s nature and it is through the condescension of Christ and

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<sup>46</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 311.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>48</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume I*, 366.

<sup>49</sup> K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton, eds., *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, 1st ed (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Pub, 2007), 208.

revelation of his glory that man can be transformed into the image of Christ. Owen insists that the image of man is not transformed by the imitation of Christ. Instead, Owen concludes that man cannot be transformed “without a view or intuition of his [Christ’s] glory which alone is accompanied with a transforming power to change them into the same image.”<sup>51</sup> Oliphint declares that “our cognitive faculties would need to take account . . . of the radical, pervasive, and universal effects of sin on those faculties.”<sup>52</sup> Oliphint says that God’s presence is not removed, but is continually shown to the creation who bears His image.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Owen would conclude that a cognitive approach to the Creator/creation relationship would account for man understanding his sin nature. Furthermore, an encounter with the glory of Christ is the foundation point at which the sinner is transformed into the image of Christ.

#### Affective

The second element that impacts worldview is the affections. The affections are undeniably an element that shape worldview. Owen notes that it is the affections that are first impacted by the love of God. Owen writes, “What he did for us is first proposed unto us, and it is that which our souls are first affected withal.”<sup>54</sup> According to Jonathan Edwards “True religion, in great part, consists in the Affections.”<sup>55</sup> James K. A. Smith believes that desire is central to

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<sup>50</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 276.

<sup>51</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 304.

<sup>52</sup> K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton, eds., *Revelation and Reason*, 212.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>54</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 162.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards 2 Volume Set*, vol. Volume 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 95.



worldview and cultural formation because it is “these affective icons of the good life . . . that shape our character by aiming our desire to a particular end.”<sup>56</sup> Owen holds a similar idea:

That the beholding of the love of Christ is one of the greatest privileges and advancements that believers are capable of in this world, or that which is to come. It is that whereby they are first gradually conformed unto it, and then fixed in the eternal enjoyment of it. For here in this life, beholding his glory, they are changed or transformed into the likeness of it, 2 Cor. iii.18; and hereafter they shall be “for ever like unto him,” because they “shall see him as he is,” 1 John iii.1, 2. Hereon do our present comforts and future blessedness depend. This is the life and reward of our souls.<sup>57</sup>

What Owen carefully acknowledges as the key to man’s affections is the love of God. In his introductory remarks he writes, “for in the glory of divine love the chief brightness of glory doth consist.”<sup>58</sup> He employs the following to describe the nature of love of God: 1) his love, as the sole impelling and leading cause, 2) the eternal disposing cause of the whole work wherein the Lord Christ was engaged, 3) the first act of love in Christ towards us in pity and compassion, 4) in this his readiness, willingness, and delight, springing from love and compassion, 5) his love worketh in and by delight.<sup>59</sup>

Owen carefully addresses the affection as a part of the believer’s life that extends from the church as believers together contemplate the glory of Christ as he writes, “And this admiration will issue in adoration and thanksgiving; whereof we have an eminent instance and example in the whole church of the redeemed.”<sup>60</sup> For Owen, the glory of Christ cannot be experienced apart from the loving relationships that are secured in the church. The church is the

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<sup>56</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 55.

<sup>57</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 287-8.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>59</sup> These excerpts are taken from Chapter V, The Glory of Christ in his Love, 333-8.

<sup>60</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 320.

community that encourages a desire for godly principles in the life of the individual. However, Owen notes that the struggle for man is rooted in the carnal mind that “neglected” spiritual things “but also despised, because they have an enmity unto them.”<sup>61</sup> Though Owen does not address the affections in this statement, there is a connection to the ideas of desires and longings in his use of the words “neglected,” “despised,” and “enmity.” Many scholars have noted similar features about man’s desires. C.S. Lewis wrote, “it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.”<sup>62</sup>

John Frame offers a perspective on the importance of the design of friendship, community, and love when he says:

Friendship and love are not only profound human experiences, but fundamental ingredients of the whole world order. There is someone who *wants* there to be friendship, who *wants* there to be love. Moral goodness too, is part of the great design of the universe.<sup>63</sup>

Frame, like Owen, notes the relationship of the community and affections as they work together to define and encourage the believer in his moral development, which in turn contributes to the order of the world. Similarly, Barrett and Haykin, in their analysis of Owen’s *The Person of Christ*, note Owen’s understanding of the relationship between Christ as the object of adoration and motivation to worship Christ. They note that Owen identifies the “affections and desires of the souls” are satisfied by the excellencies of God as the church together participates in the invocation of God in worship.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 321.

<sup>62</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory, and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 2.

<sup>63</sup> John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Pub, 1994), 36.

## Evaluative Assumptions and Frameworks

Owen was deeply concerned about those who did not know Christ as their savior, and this concern is likely the reason that Owen gave the following title for part two, *Meditations and Discourses Concerning the Glory of Christ Applied Unto Unconverted Sinners and Saints Under Spiritual Decays*. Previously the evaluative transformation theme of worldview development was briefly addressed. The theme focuses on the morality and ethics. These same themes are addressed by Owen in *Meditations* as he teaches on the problem of the sin nature and the requirement of mortification. Owen notes that most people “see neither evil nor danger in their present condition.”<sup>65</sup> His remedy is to warn his reader of their condition while emphasizing the glory of Christ. He writes, “The state of spiritual decay is recoverable.”<sup>66</sup> His goal is conversion and transformation for the unbeliever, so that as a Christian their life and morality are transformed through the mortification of sin:

A strict attendance unto the severities of mortification, with all the duties that lead thereunto, is required unto this end; so also is the utmost diligence in all duties of obedience. These things naturally offer themselves as the first relief in this case, and they ought not to be omitted.<sup>67</sup>

Owen’s aim was to describe the power of the Gospel. This would first provide conviction to the lost sinner. Second, it would help the lost person “consider the infinite condescension and love of Christ, in his invitations and calls of you to come unto him for life, deliverance, mercy,

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<sup>64</sup> Matthew Barrett and Michael A. G Haykin, *Owen on the Christian Life: Living for the Glory of God in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 106.

<sup>65</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 446.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

grace, peace, and eternal salvation.”<sup>68</sup> The theme of Christ’s glory provides an ability to reform one’s worldview.

Consider the following ideas in *The Meditations*, in which the glory of Christ is, for Owen, the predominant factor and the central means for the transformation of the sinner. The glory of Christ is that by which man considers his “present state with respect to God and eternity.”<sup>69</sup> When Owen considers the meditation of Christ for “such as are not yet Partakers of Him,” those who are unconverted, he concludes that their consideration of Christ’s glory will “prepare, incline, and dispose their minds unto a closure with him as he is tendered in the Gospel.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, when a person considers the glory of Christ there is a genuine opportunity to consider their true state and their need to be delivered from that state. In a similar manner to Owen, John Piper notes the importance of experiencing the glory of Christ as tied into the knowledge of God in salvation:

To share this experience-the experience of knowing and enjoying his glory-is the reason God created the world. He would bring us to know him and to enjoy him the way he knows himself and the way he enjoys himself. Indeed, his purpose is that the very knowledge that he has of himself will be our knowledge and our enjoyment, so that we know him with his own knowledge and we enjoy him with his own joy.<sup>71</sup>

For Owen there is a paradigm shift that happens for the believer. The transformation that happens is by the work of the Gospel as one encounters the glory of Christ created within them

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<sup>68</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume I*, 422.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 419-20.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

<sup>71</sup> Mark Dever, ed., *Preaching the Cross* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2007), 110.

which results in the pursuit of new values. The new pursuit is possible because their “breaches [were] repaired, their decays recovered, their backslidings healed.”<sup>72</sup> Owen remarks further:

They may have fresh springs of spiritual life, and vigorous actings of all divine graces, in spiritual-mindedness, holiness, and fruitfulness, unto the praise of God, the honour of the gospel, and the increase of their own peace and joy. These things they value more than all the world, and all that is in it about these things are their thoughts and contrivances exercised night and day.<sup>73</sup>

Like Owen, Hiebert insists “Conversion replaces an old set of beliefs and practices with new ones.”<sup>74</sup> As a pastor of a seventeenth-century congregation, Owen clearly understood the same concepts that occur in modern thinking: that a fundamental way of considering reality is transformed by an encounter with the glory of Christ and a proper response to him as the image of God and savior. He would have also insisted that beliefs shape worldviews and an appeal to the affections (desires) of the audience must be part of the winsome apologetic for conversion to occur.

### **Challenges to the Argument**

It is necessary to address some of the critiques to the previous argument. First, Owen presents his thoughts in a very complex organizational structure, which is difficult to determine. He is “famously long-winded, exploring one digression after another.”<sup>75</sup> As a result, it is often difficult to comprehend his arguments and the many nuances of ideas he explores. Second, Owen also wrote volumes of material, which require extensive amounts of time and energy to work

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<sup>72</sup> *The Works of John Owen. Volume 1*, 433.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 433.

<sup>74</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 319.

<sup>75</sup> Matthew Barrett and Michael A. G. Haykin, *Owen on the Christian Life: Living for the Glory of God in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 17.

through. To consolidate his thoughts to build a comprehensive understanding is an ominous task which would be better undertaken by a group than an individual. Third, because Owen's theology and perspectives are not systematized, there is a strong likelihood that some matters are overlooked.

This paper has pursued a perspective about worldview that is central to the anthropology of Paul G. Hiebert. If Owen were evaluated by different criteria regarding his worldview, the comparative arguments would be different. For instance, though James K.A. Smith identifies some similar criteria in *Desiring the Kingdom*, his focus on the importance of liturgy that is imbedded into one's worldview would align differently with Owen. Another example to consider is Owen's views as compared to Charles Taylor's perspective on worldview. Taylor would likely insist that the practices of the social imaginary would present a challenge to analyzing Owen by the same criteria.<sup>76</sup> Owen was much more focused on the cognitive and the affections than Taylor's noncognitive understanding.<sup>77</sup>

### Summary

Though John Owen, the seventeenth-century Puritan, may seem like an unlikely source to consult regarding the contemporary issues of worldview, he does offer timeless wisdom and a

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<sup>76</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2018. 160-211. The idea of social imaginary addresses the way in which people think that they have moral obligations to one another. Taylor believes that the Gospel "generates the idea of a community of saints, inspired by love for God, for each other, and for humankind (161). There is a sense of Utopia that is found in this community together. The criteria by which Taylor evaluates worldviews would help in understanding Owen. Taylor believes that the social imaginary was beginning to develop in the seventeenth century. However, the basis for Taylor's social imaginary is found in the social existence of relationships. This is a far cry for Hiebert's system and would lead to a different evaluative process regarding Owen.

<sup>77</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 65.

relevant perspective for the twenty-first century. The theology and philosophy of Owen are so thorough that a careful investigation of his thoughts yields fruitful contributions to modern ideas. Though the categories of his thought may differ slightly from the modern categories, his understanding, logic, and comprehensive arguments are compelling still.

The goal of this paper was to argue that the teaching of Owen in *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* is illustrative of the themes consistent with a strong biblical worldview and serves as a useful and relevant apologetic tool for Christians in the twenty-first century. Owen employs similar and relevant concepts that relate to the cognitive, affectual, and evaluative transformative principles that effect worldviews. Owen makes unapologetic claims that understanding the glory of Christ is the beginning of transformation. Furthermore, he recognizes that Christ appeals to reason and affections which together provide personal and corporate transformation. Therefore, personal transformation, or conversion to faith in Christ, is the event which inserts the individual into the corporate community, the church. Owen considers this kind of transformation to be the event by which one's broader community is impacted as the individual and church together express their love of Christ.

It should be noted that the works of Owen are being modernized by publishers to make them more accessible for readers.<sup>78</sup> Owen offers rich perspective on a variety of doctrines. This paper has sought to show the importance of Owen's thoughts on the glory of Christ and their ongoing benefit for readers.

The greatest benefit to reading Owen's thoughts is particularly discovered in the doctrinal issues regarding the glory of Christ. The advantage is found in how he expounds on the doctrine

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<sup>78</sup> Crawford Gribben, *10 Things You Should Know about John Owen*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-john-owen/>

while recognizing, with a pastor's heart, the impact that the doctrine has for people who long for a better world. By his wisdom and thorough teaching, Owen is a source that is invaluable for biblical worldview development in the twenty-first century. Finally, Owen is a teacher who possesses the mind and heart to lead in Gospel transformation. Therefore, pastors would benefit by consulting the works of Owen, who employs a biblical worldview worthy of impacting the modern era with truth, focus on affections, and moral framework.



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