Summary

This study focuses on the theme of the kingdom of Christ in the thought, activity, and context of John Owen (1616-1683). For Owen, the kingdom of Christ is the realm of Christ’s rule experienced internally and personally in individual Christians; however, more collectively, this kingdom is externally manifested in ecclesiastical politics, local churches, and the eschatological anticipation of an age of “latter-day glory.” These matters are significantly interrelated and overlapping in Owen’s sermons and writings. Likewise, England’s struggles for “further reformation” in the volatile mid-seventeenth century (roughly 1640s-80s), gave birth to a variety of ideals and proposals for liberty/toleration, confessionalization, Protestant unity, ecclesiastical power and polity — with eschatological interpretations and anticipations often in the background, if not the forefront. This study not only seeks to assess the interrelationship of these matters in Owen’s thought and context, but also analyze any development or change that may or may not have taken place in Owen’s personal beliefs about liberty/toleration, local church polity, and the end-times.

Chapter 1 introduces the significance of such a study by surveying the relevant secondary literature. While Owen has in recent decades enjoyed a renaissance of scholarly attention among historical theologians, their studies have focused on more strictly doctrinal matters of his thought. However, more practical matters — especially political/ecclesiastical endeavors and writings — have been sorely neglected. Simultaneously, early modern historians have more recently emphasized the religious orientation to England’s upheavals in mid-seventeenth century. Owen’s significance in these times and events has increasingly been appreciated. However, their studies, which often survey a theme or debate in a given decade, cannot possibly give sufficient attention to one figure’s theological nuances, connections, and/or changes. In short, the sheer number of works Owen published on ecclesiology and ecclesiastical politics may be unrivaled by any

269
other category of his thought, and yet it has been over 40 years since a study on Owen has focused on these important matters. No scholar has yet to couch these issues together (as Owen does) under the overarching theme of the kingdom of Christ.

Chapter 2 provides a brief biographical sketch of Owen, highlighting those events, developments, and documents which help to situate the more in-depth analyses of the chapters that follow. Indeed, three main, lengthy chapters follow, making up the body of this study. These build upon each other, with successive chapters returning to earlier themes in order to make additional connections and observations.

Chapter 3 (“Setting Up the Kingdom: The Theology and Politics of Confessionalization”) gives attention to ecclesiastical politics on the national, legislative level. The interrelated matters of liberty/toleration, Protestant unity, the vetting of ministers, and confessionalization all came together in the 1650s when the so-called “Puritans in power” made various attempts at a new national church settlement—one less prescriptive than Westminster Assembly’s, yet not aloof to heresies. With varying success, but with never any lasting success, these confessional-legislative proposals culminated in the Savoy Assembly (1658), and it is here that the majority of this chapter’s attention is given. The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order has largely been viewed as a defensive, separatist statement of Congregationalist belief and practice, but this chapter argues that it was a more politically proactive endeavor. The lengthy Preface (among other pieces of evidence) helps to explain the assumptions and aims of the Savoy delegates. Most likely authored by Owen, the Preface also provides substantial commentary on their assumed approach to confessions and confessionalization. While the doctrinal content of the Savoy Declaration seldom breaks from Westminster’s Confession, the Preface’s confessional vision is more progressive in multiple ways, which this chapter lays out.

This chapter also seeks to explore possible sources for Owen’s preferred parameters for confessionalization and ecclesiastical politics. From a previously unutilized autobiographical account, a possible solution is found in a surprising source. It is also in this personal account that Owen states explicitly that his view of liberty/toleration went through a change in the mid-1640s.
However, in examining his writings in the post-Restoration years (1660ff) — when Puritans of Owen’s ilk were no longer in power, but marginalized and even persecuted — it is shown that Owen’s ideals did not change under those very different circumstances.

Chapter 4 (“The Keys of the Kingdom: The Nature, Power, and Government of the Church”) looks to Owen’s local church polity. It is here that another autobiographical account retells of his of conversion to Congregationalism (from Presbyterianism). This move in ecclesiology has often been noted in Owen studies; however, it has been variously understood and never examined carefully. The specifics of his earlier and later ecclesiologies are studied in this chapter, as is the precise timing of this shift in church polity. Owen attributes his move to Congregationalism in large part to John Cotton’s The Keyes of the Kingdom of Christ; thus, the keys of the kingdom (a la Matt. 16:19) becomes crucial to his ecclesiological conversion and a frequent topic in his later Congregationalist writings. However, careful study of these later works indicates that Owen was not as consistent and/or carefully nuanced as many of his Congregationalist colleagues in his interpretation of the recipients of the keys of the kingdom. While his church polity never reverted to Presbyterianism, as some have posited, he did not always follow the more typical lines of Congregationalist thought. This chapter also returns to the earlier theme of liberty/toleration to assess possible connections between the Congregationalists’ ecclesiology and view(s) of liberty. Owen and Cotton are compared on this score as well. It is here that the thorny issue of execution for heresy is explored, with the infamous Miguel Servetus serving as a test-case. It is argued that, though history has generally viewed Cotton as less than tolerant, his basic convictions are essentially the same as Owen’s, and differing contexts better explain any perceived differences between the two transatlantic Puritans.

Chapter 5 (“The Coming of the Kingdom: Eschatology and its Political-Ecclesiastical Significance”) turns to Owen’s eschatological understanding of the kingdom of Christ. For Owen, the kingdom is manifested outwardly throughout the church age, but more increasingly and intensely as it approaches and enters an era of “latter-day glory.” This optimistic eschatology (like its close relative, millenarianism) was conducive to
interpreting providential circumstances in order to gauge the proximity of this latter-day. Thus, the puritanically-optimistic circumstances of the Revolution and Protectorate years bred great eschatological interest and anticipation, not least for Owen who had risen to the highest level of religio-political influence in the late-1640s and 1650s. This chapter explores Owen’s sermons of that time, which were teeming with eschatological fervor and political playmaking. Historians since have largely underestimated his involvement and influence. This is demonstrated in several ways, not least Owen’s public call for the king’s execution, which he interpreted as an eschatological necessity.

Many scholars have assumed that the great reversal of fortunes that took place in post-Restoration and Puritan-persecuted years was too much for the hopeful, circumstantially-tied eschatology. Many have since assumed Owen’s eschatology (and/or politics) necessarily went through modification under such defeated circumstances. However, this interpretation is likely leaning too heavily on an older model of historiography for Puritan eschatology. This chapter argues instead that Owen’s eschatology was not significantly altered in later years. Owen similarly summarized the basic tenets of his end-time beliefs throughout his writings, even in his final years. Further, it is shown that his earlier optimism was also punctuated with qualifications and interpretive cautions which allowed for the possibility of a more bleak future. Unlike others, he never quite painted himself into a corner with eschatological predictions. While the age of “latter-day glory” seemed possibly close in the 1650s, and not as close in the trying decades that followed, the basic theses of his eschatological anticipation never changed. In fact, whether before or after that great divide of 1660, Owen saw eschatology as formative to and intertwined with his views of liberty, Protestant unity, local church polity, worship, the need for further reformation in England, and the spread of the gospel beyond.

Chapter 6, in conclusion, summarizes the findings of the previous chapters, highlighting the discoveries and interpretations which are unique to this study. It concludes that Owen’s view of the kingdom of Christ was multi-faceted, with eschatology functioning as the connective tissue holding together many ideas.
for church, nation, and reformation. The final assessment is that, on these matters, Owen can be described as one Reformed and reforming.