Cooper, Tim. *When Christians Disagree: Lessons from the Fractured Relationship of John Owen and Richard Baxter*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2024. 127pp. + 10pp. (front matter) + 40pp. (back matter).

Richard Baxter and John Owen had a great deal in common. Born within a year of each other, both were reared in devout Puritan homes, both were formidable intellects, both were prolific authors, and "both men were nothing if not faithful to the very end" (26). They were, in the understated words of the title of Cooper's first chapter, "two good men" who "came to dislike each other so intensely" that "they brought out the worst in each other" (6). This is, of course, not a recent phenomenon created by social media and the ability to publish one's opinions and criticisms instantaneously (though that doesn't help).[1] And Cooper's point in recounting the nature of this relationship "is not so much that Christians disagree but how they go about their disagreements" (6). Owen and Baxter are role models in this respect; unfortunately, they are not good ones. They do not "come out of this book looking like saints" (7). Cooper is not out to rubbish them; his genuine esteem for both men is evident throughout the book. At the same time, it is not helpful to have an entirely sanitized, unrealistic view of past saints. Their triumphs can inspire us; their failures ought to caution us to remember that they, like us, "are sinners and saints all at the same time" (7).

Cooper introduces the reader to the subjects' backgrounds (chapter 1) and experiences (chapter 2). Both men entered adulthood during the English Civil War but experienced it from very different vantage points. Baxter was an army chaplain in the Midlands where most of the fighting occurred, preaching in earshot of cannon fire and ministering amid much of the death and gore of war. Owen, meanwhile, lived a safe and relatively well-connected life near London, far from nearly all of the fighting. As Cooper tersely observes, "Geography matters."

> Both Baxter and Owen supported Parliament's cause in the civil war; they were on the same side. Yet their perspectives on the war provide a study in contrasts. . . . Where Baxter perceived the civil war as a disaster for the gospel in England, Owen saw it as a triumph. Their perspectives could hardly have been more different. . . . Owen felt England to be on the brink of a glorious reformation; Baxter felt that the Reformation had been jettisoned. . . . Both looked for the hand of God in contemporary events, yet they interpreted that hand in starkly different ways. . . . Owen saw the war as a blessing from God, while Baxter viewed it as God's judgment on a sinful people. Same war, same side, but different worlds. (35, 33, 36, 37)

Cooper funnels each chapter toward a concluding series of probing, self-reflective questions to help readers personalize and process the lessons of each chapter. It is a common enough feature in books these days; but given the subject matter, it is one of the most valuable aspects of the book.

Theology may have been the topic of the conflict between Owen and Baxter, but it was "as much as anything else, a personality clash" (chapter 3, "Personality"). If we think their differences were purely theological, "we will miss the subtle but powerful impact of their experience and their personality"

[1] For a biblical-theological exploration of this same topic, see Layton Talbert, "Managing Our Differences: Biblical Norms for Navigating Our Inevitable Disagreements," *JBTW* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2024): 48–69.

(41). Personal information about Owen is hard to come by, but "one thing is clear: he possessed an ability to advance his career" and "to network, and he was not without ambition" (43). A "political player" with a "relentless determination to get his way," Owen "could be touchy when it came to slights on his authority, and he was not a man to be contradicted" (46, 47).

> Admittedly, it is difficult to square this impression of Owen with his reputation as a towering theologian. We expect such figures to be above the foibles of mere human temperament, but they never are. This is a most unflattering picture. . . . This is not the whole of the man. But it does explain something. If this is Owen's personality, what other type of personality would be likely to rub him the wrong way? Who would he find particularly grating and abrasive? The answer is someone who did not demonstrate proper deference, who lacked Owen's deft political facility, who blurted out the truth as he saw it with little regard for the feelings of others, who had his own implacable views. . . . Someone, in other words, a lot like Richard Baxter. (48)

As a boy, Baxter reportedly had no qualms about rebuking other children for their profane language. "We are told that it pleased his elders, but it could hardly have delighted his playmates" (49). Cooper explores other aspects of Baxter's life experience that certainly had an impact on his personality. As an only child, Baxter was accustomed to having "his own way, with no near rival to contradict him" and thus "lacked the opportunity a larger family presented to develop skills in negotiation or empathy" (49); Owen, on the other hand, was the second of at least six children. Baxter never went to university with its benefits of networking and community, and instead "came to his views, in the main, by reading" (50); Owen spent several years at Oxford. Baxter married late at age forty-seven; Owen married at twenty-six. Baxter never had children; Owen had eleven.

> All of this helps explain the enduring irony of Baxter's life: he genuinely desired nothing more than to cultivate peace and unity, but his style and temperament regularly caused offense and generated conflict. Both friend and foe alike observed his tendency to come across as magisterial, haughty, arrogant, impervious to correction, blind to his own weakness, incapable of self-doubt, and personally disdainful of others. (50–51)

That's not to say he was entirely unaware of such tendencies, as his correspondence bears out (51–52). But it is one thing to be aware of our weaknesses and sins, and another thing to conquer them. "When these two personalities finally came into direct contact, the result was never going to be pretty. . . . Owen was easily exasperated; Baxter was simply exasperating" (53). The upshot for us? "Vocal disagreements that seem on the surface to be merely theological may be much more substantially the product of clashing personalities. Recognizing that factor is surely an essential requirement in resolving the conflict" (54)—or at least managing it with grace and Christlikeness.

Chapter 4 moves finally into the theological issues that sparked their relational conflagration. "Theology does truly matter. But, as we have seen, so does biography. It is impossible to separate how we think from what we have experienced" (57). Their different emphases can be explained "in large part because each was driven by a different set of concerns" (58). Despite those differences, Cooper

spells out "just how much they had in common" and the fact that "we can see both men as Calvinists" who "shared an enormous amount of common ground" but "stood back-to-back, looking in opposite directions and subject to opposite fears" that "made it extremely difficult for each man to see in the other the many points they held in common" (69).[2]

If Cooper's depiction is accurate (and he quotes amply from both men), the tone of Baxter's initial critiques of Owen were "relatively measured" even if somewhat off-pitch (76). Owen, nonetheless, "was deeply offended, and the language he used throughout his short reply made that very clear" (77). Baxter refrained from responding for five years and, when he did, his answers to Owen were "both brief and respectful" (79) but still expressed concern over the potential impact of some of Owen's views. Owen's reply was devastating: "a remarkably personal, bitter, and scathing rebuke" (81). Baxter, in return, only escalated matters, doubling down on his criticisms and making them, if anything, more pointed and insistent. "He complained that he had been personally attacked, 'voluminously slandered,' and roundly criticized as 'hypocritically proud.' Instead of understanding, he had received from Owen 'ingenious malice'" (81). All of this was conducted not in personal letters but public print. The heightened stakes of a reading audience "made any sort of reconciliation that much harder. Pride and ego came into play, rather than humility, kindness, and generosity. The damage had been done. By 1650 the written word had estranged two men who had not yet even met" (83).

The plot only thickened when the two men finally did meet (chapter 6, "Collision"). In 1654 Parliament called "a subcommittee of around a dozen minister-theologians to prepare a list of the fundamentals for the approval of Parliament and the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell" (95). Owen, a Congregationalist and leading theologian with Parliamentary connections, was an obvious choice. Archbishop James Ussher from Ireland was nominated but declined. His replacement was Richard Baxter, who had a penchant for insisting on the exclusive use of expressly scriptural language in the formation of any confession. Seeing his opinions would not prevail, he decided that the only remaining strategy was "to hinder them from doing harm and thrusting in their own opinions or crude conceits, among our fundamentals" (98). "The whole affair achieved nothing but to confirm Baxter and Owen in their worst views of each other and to permanently darken their relationship" (99–100). Cooper notes, "The great irony is that the project in which Baxter and Owen were involved in 1654 was designed to achieve unity and mend division, but the outcome was the opposite, at least for them" (100).

The final nail in the coffin of their relationship sealed it so tight that the breach was to extend even beyond the grave. But my space is running out, so I must leave that for readers to explore on their own (see chapter 7, "Memory"). Cooper concludes with the observation that "even the most conscientious Christians disagree. It is their very conscientiousness that can trigger their disagreement. They take truth seriously. It matters. It matters enough to take a stand, even against a fellow believer" (119–20). But when that becomes necessary, for it is inevitable, what can we learn from Owen and Baxter so as

[2] Cooper goes into adequate detail about the theological issues on which they divided. I decided to avoid addressing those issues in this review; the larger scope and purpose of the book points to the observation that in the broad scheme of things, the specific points of disagreement are comparatively irrelevant. Our theological differences with one another are constantly shifting, and the goal is not so much to decide which side to take as to learn to manage our differences well.

not to repeat their errors? Cooper develops five suggestions (120–25). (1) Look for a mediator. (2) Never lose sight of common ground. (3) Take seriously the Scriptures "that summon us to unity and concord." (4) Cultivate humility. (5) Consider the invisible factors behind our disagreements. These are followed by a series of searching questions to ask ourselves in order to manage our disagreements more scripturally (125–26).

To be honest, I had a hard time putting down my highlighter. The brief chapters are packed with intriguing historical background, astonishing statements from both Owen and Baxter, and Cooper's own insightful observations along the way.

> We tend to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals firmly in control of our own decision-making, finding our way in the world through the choices we make, both large and small. While this is true to a significant extent, it is not an entirely safe assumption. It overlooks the ways in which we have been profoundly shaped by forces that lie outside our control. We do not choose the family into which we are born, our DNA, our prenatal environment, the quality of nurture we receive in our early years, or the shaping forces in our social, political, and cultural context as we grow into maturity. All that life experience molds how we see the world and how we perceive both ourselves and others. When two people come into conflict, they bring with them a contrasting set of perspectives informed by their respective pasts. Their personal history is very much alive. It operates in ways that they themselves may not recognize, let alone the person with whom they have clashed. Thus, two people can be set up for conflict and misunderstanding before they even meet. (29)

In his Introduction, Cooper invites his readers "to apply the lessons of this story" to how we manage the modern issues that often divide us, confessing, "I have no easy answers" (6). To be sure, there are simple answers; but that is not at all the same thing. Cooper's lists of reflective questions at the end of each chapter, along with the book's manageable brevity, make this an excellent venue for group discussion.

Cooper forewarns his readers on the front end: "Spoiler Alert: there is no happy ending" (4). Ah, but there is. Baxter and Owen have been enjoying it for 300 years, where the spirits of just men are made perfect and the saints enjoy eternal rest.

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