

**THE COVENANT OF WORKS REVIVED:
John Owen on Republication in the Mosaic Covenant**

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“Now this is no other but the covenant of works revived.” – John Owen¹

Introduction

Since its earliest days, the new covenant church has faced a thorny question: How does the Mosaic covenant (or “old” covenant) relate to Christianity? On the one hand, there is an organic *continuity* between the two. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them” (Mt 5.17). The apostle Paul fleshes this out in his epistle to the Romans through his explanation that “the Law and the Prophets bear witness to . . . the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ” (Romans 3.21-22). On the other hand, however, there is a clear *discontinuity* between the old and the new. “The law was given through Moses,” says John in the prologue to his Gospel, “but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1.17). Paul contrasts the old and new covenants by calling the former “the ministry of death” and the latter “the ministry of the Spirit” (2 Cor 3.7-8). While the church historically has applied the Law of Moses to Christianity by adopting what Calvin called “the common division” of civil, ceremonial, and moral (with only the last being applicable to Christians), it has nevertheless struggled to understand how the Mosaic covenant as a whole comports with the new covenant.²

¹ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 7, found in *Works*, XXII (Repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 78. Hereafter, Owen’s *Works* will simply be referred to by volume number.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vols. XX-XXI, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (1559, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, repr. 1975), IV.20.14. Cf. II.7-8. Calvin did not invent this division; rather, he regarded it as a received and long-standing distinction among the ancient writers. One finds that Justin Martyr and, subsequently, Irenaeus, divided the law into three different elements: the ethical element, the prophetic element, and the historical element. For example, see Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue*, 44.1-4. A detailed analysis of this can be found in Theodore Stylianopoulos, *Justin Martyr and the Moral Law* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974). In the Thirteenth Century, Thomas Aquinas carefully divided the Mosaic Law into ceremonial, judicial, and moral, as seen in Q.99.3-4 of his *Summa Theologiae* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1989). This tripartite division is ordinarily found in Reformed theology as well. See Zacharius Ursinas, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinas on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg: P & R, reproduction of the Second American Edition which was printed at Columbus, Ohio in 1852, n.d.), 488-618; William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (1629, Boston:

This was a question of particular interest to the Reformed Orthodox of the seventeenth-century as they developed their covenant theology. The tension between the old and new covenants and how they interact within the *historia salutis* was one with which they wrestled as they defended, clarified, and codified the doctrines and practices of the early Reformation. While there remained a substantive continuity between the thought of Calvin and his contemporaries and the thought of their orthodox successors with regard to God's one plan of salvation (i.e. *sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus*) mediated in one covenant of grace (*foedus gratiae*), there were, nevertheless, competing views on how the Mosaic covenant fit into that system. Two general schools of interpretation emerged during the seventeenth-century. The first school taught that the Mosaic covenant was merely an administrative part of the covenant of grace. The second school, however, taught that the Mosaic covenant was *distinct from* the covenant of grace in that it somehow renewed the original covenant of works (*foedus operum*). Within these two schools of Reformed thought, there existed a spectrum of sub-views with regard to how the Mosaic covenant, with its prescribed works, specifically related to the covenant of grace and its new covenant administration.

This debate, however, did not end in the seventeenth-century. A substantial amount of disagreement on the role of the Mosaic covenant in the *historia salutis* has continued in Reformed circles into the present day. In the latter part of the past century, John Murray

PilgrimPress, repr. 1968); Westminster Confession of Faith, IXX and XXI.7; Westminster Larger Catechism, 91-150; Westminster Shorter Catechism, 39-83; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1994), 2:1-167; Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God & Man*, (1677, Kingsburg: den Dulk Christian Foundation, repr. 1990), 2:162-187; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1999), 3:259-463; A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (1869, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, repr. 1998), 248-259; R.L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1871, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, repr. 1996), 351-429; B.B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, (Nutley: P & R, 1970-73), 1:213; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1938, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1996), 541; John Murray *Collected Writings of John Murray*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:193-228.

argued, “The view that in the Mosaic covenant there was a repetition of the so-called covenant of works, current among covenant theologians, is a grave misconception and involves an erroneous construction of the Mosaic covenant.”³ Likewise, O. Palmer Robertson has contended, “The history of God’s covenant people indicates that the covenants basically are one. The Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants do not supplant one another; they supplement one another. A basic unity binds them together.”⁴ On the other hand, some Reformed theologians have seen a much sharper contrast in the contours of redemptive history. Meredith Kline, for example, maintained, “The Sinaitic administration...[was] in itself a dispensation of the kingdom inheritance quite opposite in principle to inheritance by guaranteed promise.”⁵

The purpose of this essay is to examine the thought of one of the most prominent federalist theologians of the seventeenth-century, namely, John Owen (1616-1683). As an Oxford University Vice-Chancellor, preacher to Parliament, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, prolific author and Congregationalist pastor, Owen was hugely significant and influential in his covenant theology.⁶ This essay pursues the question of what Owen believed with

³ John Murray, “The Adamic Administration” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol.2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 50.

⁴ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1980), 34.

⁵ Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 22-24.

⁶ Owen’s work falls within the first phase of high orthodoxy, namely, 1640-1685. According to Richard Muller, early orthodoxy runs from 1565 and the deaths of “many of the important second-generation codifiers of the Reformed faith (John Calvin, Wolfgang Musculus, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and Andreas Hyperius)” to 1640 and the deaths of “the theologians who sat at Dort and perpetuated its carefully outlined confessionalism...among them, Antonius Walaeus, Johann Polyander, Sibrandus Lubbertus, Franciscus Gomarus, Johannes Maccovius, John Davenant – together with writers like William Ames and J.H. Alstead.” High orthodoxy followed, which ran from 1640 to 1725. The first phase, 1640-1685, is characterized by “internal or intraconfessional controversies, such as the broader Amyraldian controversy and the debate over Cocceian federal theology as well as the vast expansion of debate with the Socinians over the doctrine of the Trinity.” Says Muller, “In this phase of the high orthodox period are found such authors as Johannes Cocceius, Samuel Maresius, Andreas Essenius, Gibertus Voetius, Friedrich Spanheim the elder, Marcus Friedrich Wendelin, Franz Burman, Francis Turretin, Edward Leigh, Matthew Poole, John Owen, and Stephan Charnock.” After 1685, “the tenor of orthodoxy changed, although the confessional boundaries continued to remain relatively in place...The changes that took place included an

regard to the Mosaic covenant and considers what implications his position had upon his doctrine of justification *sola fide*. It argues that, *for Owen, the old and new covenants were two distinct covenants because the old covenant was a republication of the covenant of works, superimposed upon and subservient to the covenant of grace.*

There is a need to look more closely at Owen's understanding of the Mosaic covenant, for, in many cases, recent scholarship has afforded little attention to this part of Owen's theology. In his most recent work on Owen, Carl Trueman devotes a full chapter on Owen's covenant theology, but surprisingly omits any handling of the Puritan's view of the Mosaic covenant.⁷ In his taxonomy of early seventeenth-century covenant theology, Mark Karlberg only covers theologians up to the Westminster Assembly, thus excluding arguably the most significant covenant theologian in England during the seventeenth century.⁸ Sinclair Ferguson, on the other hand, reflects on Owen's view of Sinai, but his treatment is brief and has the main concern of showing how Owen's covenant theology affects practical Christian experience.⁹ Jeong Koo Jeon, on the other hand, gives extensive treatment of Owen's view of the Mosaic covenant, but unfortunately misrepresents Owen on this point.¹⁰

increased pressure on the precritical textual, exegetical, and hermeneutical model of orthodoxy, an alteration of the philosophical model used by theologians from the older Christian Aristotelian approach to either a variant of the newer rationalism or a virtually a-philosophical version of dogmatics. This is also the era of the beginning of internal divisions in the Reformed confessions over the issues raised by the piety of the Second Reformation or *Nadere Reformatie* and by the dispossessed status of Reformed Protestants in England and France. By 1725, a fairly uniform and unified confessional subscription had faded both in England and in Switzerland." See Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol.1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 30-32.

⁷ Carl Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 67-99.

⁸ Mark W. Karlberg, *The Mosaic Covenant and the Concept of Works in Reformed Hermeneutics: A Historical-Critical Analysis with Particular Attention to Early Covenant Eschatology*, PhD. dissertation, (Westminster Theological Seminary, 1980).

⁹ Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 27-32.

¹⁰ Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray's and Meredith G. Kline's Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999), 50. Jeon explains Owen's view with the following quote: "The Old and New Covenants, however, were 'not

In order to defend the thesis stated above, this essay makes three main observations. First, it examines Owen's general covenant schema in terms of the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*), covenant of works, and covenant of grace. Secondly, it analyzes Owen's position on the Mosaic covenant, looking at how he understood the relationship of the Mosaic covenant to the covenant of works, the covenant of grace, and the new covenant. Finally, it considers the implications Owen's view had for his doctrine of justification *sola fide*.

Owen's Covenant Schema

While not a central dogma, covenant was, for Owen, the framework and organizing principle of Scripture and theology. "All theology," said Owen, "is based on a covenant."¹¹ As a Reformed scholastic, Owen stood within that theological tradition, running continuously from the Reformation to the era of high orthodoxy and beyond, which regarded covenant as the key to Bible interpretation. In his multi-volume exegetical work, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1668-84), in which he provides some of his fullest treatment of covenant theology, Owen describes a covenant as a "voluntary convention, pact, or agreement, between distinct persons, about the ordering and disposal of things in their power, unto their mutual concern and advantage."¹² To this Owen added a subset of criteria: a proposal of service, a promise of reward, and an acceptance of the proposal (XIX, 81-84). Owen recognized that Scripture

indeed two distinct covenants, as unto their essence and substance, but only different administrations of the same covenant." The problem with this quote, however, is that Owen was not describing his own view, but the with which he disagreed.

¹¹ John Owen, *Biblical Theology* [trans. by Stephen Wescott] (Orlando: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994), 28. This is the only book Owen published in Latin. The original title is *Theologoumena pantodapa sive, De natura, ortu, progressu, et studio, verae theologiae, libri sex* (1661).

¹² XIX, 82. Cf. VI, 470; X, 168; XI, 210; XXIII, 55.

presents a substantial variety of covenants, some being conditional, others unconditional, some entered jointly by the parties, others unilaterally imposed.

Like many federalist theologians of his time, Owen saw three overarching biblical covenants: the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*), covenant of works (*foedus operum*), and covenant of grace (*foedus gratiae*).

Covenant of Redemption

In the mid-seventeenth-century, the covenant of redemption was widely held, both in Britain and on the continent, to be an eternal, intra-Trinitarian covenant for the purpose of Christ's mediation on behalf of the elect.¹³ Owen was no exception to that trend. In his 1655 work against the Socinians, *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, Owen described the covenant of redemption as "that compact, covenant, convention, or agreement, that was between the Father and the Son, for the accomplishment of the work of our redemption by the mediation of Christ, to the praise of the glorious grace of God."¹⁴ He saw five major elements within this covenant: (i) The Father, as "promiser," and the Son, as "undertaker," voluntarily agreed together in counsel to achieve a common purpose, namely, "the glory of God and the salvation of the elect."¹⁵ (ii) The Father prescribed conditions for this covenant, which consisted of the Son assuming human nature, fulfilling the demands of the law through his obedience, and suffering the just judgment

¹³ See Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, Volume Four (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 266-67, where he mentions Amandus Polanus (1561-1610) and Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669); and Trueman, *John Owen*, 81-87, where he mentions David Dickson (1583-1662), Edward Fisher (1627-1655) and Peter Bulkeley (1583-1659). For an example of how the idea of the *pactum salutis* is found in sixteenth-century theologians, such as Casper Olevianus, see R.S. Clark, *Casper Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant: The Double Benefit of Christ* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2005), 177-80.

¹⁴ XII, 497. Owen sometimes calls the covenant of redemption the 'covenant of the Mediator' or 'Redeemer' as in XIX, 78 and XXII, 230.

¹⁵ XII, 498-500. Owen cited Prov 8.22-31; Ps 60.14; Isaiah 9.6; Zech 4.12-13; 13.7; Heb 2.9-10; 12.2.

of God for the elect in order to satisfy God's justice on their behalf.¹⁶ (iii) The promises of the covenant, which were two: First, the Father assisting the Son in the accomplishment of his redeeming work by continually being present with him as he underwent the afflictions and trials of his earthly life. Secondly, if the Son did what was required of him, the work itself would prosper by bringing about the deliverance and glorification of those for whom he obeyed and suffered. These promises the Father confirmed with an oath.¹⁷ (iv) The Son voluntarily accepted the conditions, and assumed the work as surety of the covenant.¹⁸ (v) The Father approved and accepted the performance of the Son, who likewise laid claim to the promises made in the covenant.¹⁹

Owen believed the covenant of redemption to be the basis and driving purpose of redemptive history.²⁰ Thus, it was a doctrine too important to state vaguely in the church's confession. In the confession he helped craft in 1658 for the Congregationalist churches, namely, the Savoy Declaration, a modification of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) to suit Congregationalist polity, Owen included explicit language to that

¹⁶ XII, 499, 501-2. Owen cited Job 33.23, 24; Isa 42.1; 49.5; 53.10; John 14.28; Rom 8.3; Gal 4.4; Phil 2.6-7; Heb 10.5-9. See also X, 168-174; XXII, 446-481.

¹⁷ XII, 499, 503-5. Said Owen, "He who prescribes the hard conditions of incarnation, obedience, and death, doth also make the glorious promises of preservation, protection, and success. And to make these promises more eminent, God confirms them solemnly by an oath. He is consecrated a high priest for evermore by the 'word of the oath,' Heb. vii.28." Owen cited Ps 16.10-11; 22.30-31; 89.27-28; Isa 42.4, 6; 50.5-9; 52.1-4; 53.10,11; Heb 5.7; 7.21, 28; 12.2. See also X, 168-71.

¹⁸ XII, 499, 505. Said Owen, "[Christ] made himself surety of the covenant, and so was to pay what he never took. He voluntarily engaged himself into this sponson; but when he had so done, he was legally subject to all that attended it, - when he had put his name into the obligation, he became responsible for the whole debt. And all that he did or suffered comes to be called 'obedience;' which relates to the law that he was subject to, having engaged himself to his Father, and said to the LORD, 'Thou art my Lord; lo, I have come to do thy will.'" Owen cited Ps 16.2; 40.7-8; Isa 50.5; Phil 2.6-8. See also X, 174.

¹⁹ XII, 499, 505-507. Owen cited Job 33.24; Ps 2.7-8; Isa 49.5-9; Dan 9.24; Acts 13.33; Rom 1.4; Jn 17 (which, said Owen, "the whole chapter is the demand of Christ for the accomplishment of the whole compact and all the promises that were made to him when he undertook to be a Saviour, which concerned both himself and his church"); Heb 7.25; 9.24.

²⁰ Carl Trueman rightly says, "The covenant of redemption is the foundation of the economy of salvation and of the Incarnation and it is this, therefore, that should be the starting-point of any discussion of the person of Jesus Christ in Owen's theology. *John Owen*, 80.

effect.²¹ The Savoy Declaration modified the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith VIII.1. The latter reads, “It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, His only begotten Son, to be Mediator between God and man.” The Savoy Declaration VIII.1 reads, “It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to chuse [sic] and ordain the Lord Jesus his onely [sic] begotten Son, according to a Covenant made between them both, to be the Mediator between God and Man.”

Where Owen made a significant contribution to the development of this doctrine, however, was in his consideration of the Holy Spirit’s function in the covenant of redemption. This was, according to Carl Trueman, “a point which represents a distinctly Trinitarian advance on the works of Fisher and Bulkeley who, with their exclusive attention to the Father-Son relationship were arguably vulnerable to the accusation of developing a sub-Trinitarian foundation for the economy of salvation” (Trueman, *John Owen*, 86). Owen was careful to describe the distinct roles of each Person in the Godhead, showing the Trinitarian nature of salvation. With regard to the Holy Spirit, it was through him that the Virgin Mary conceived the Incarnate Christ, the Son offered himself to the Father, and was raised from the dead.²² The Spirit also brings the elect into union with Christ their Savior efficaciously and keeps them secure.²³

²¹ Peter Toon points out that “a committee of six – Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, William Bridge, William Greenhill, Joseph Caryl (all of whom had been members of the Westminster Assembly) and John Owen – was appointed to prepare a the draft of a declaration of faith and church order.” *God’s Statesman*, 103-07. Likewise, Trueman says that because Owen “was one of the principal architects of the [Savoy]... the document can be assumed to reflect his theology and his view of the inadequacy or ambiguity of the original Westminster Confession of Faith formulation.” *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 108.

²² X, 163-78. Owen referred to Mt 1.18; Lk 1.35, 80; Rom 1.4; 8.11; Heb 9.14; and 1 Pet 3.18.

²³ XI, 336ff. For an example of how Owen preached on the roles of each divine Person of the Godhead in the *pactum salutis*, see his sermon, “The Everlasting Covenant, the Believer’s Support under Distress,” (1669), in *Works*, vol. IX, 418-19.

For Owen, the covenant of redemption made explicit Christ's role as the second Adam and federal head, who, on behalf of those given to him by the Father, overcame the catastrophic consequences of the first Adam's breaking of the covenant of works and merited the benefits of redemption mediated in the covenant of grace.

Covenant of Works

Like the concept of a covenant of redemption, the doctrine of a covenant of works between God and Adam in the prelapsarian state was widespread in Reformed Orthodoxy.²⁴ It received more explicit expression in the Westminster Standards than did the covenant of redemption.²⁵ Owen himself was firmly committed to this doctrine. In his book, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith through the Imputation of the Righteousness of Christ; Explained, Confirmed, and Vindicated* (1677), Owen explained the covenant of works as that covenant between God and Adam "with promises and threatenings, or rewards and punishments, annexed unto it" (V, 275). By his free act, God established it as the arrangement through which Adam was able to achieve eschatological life.²⁶

While Owen fully believed that God created humankind in true righteousness and true holiness without blemish, he did not believe that that original, prelapsarian state was an end in itself. God promised eschatological life as a possibility to Adam and all those whom he represented so that "upon our personal obedience, according to the law and rule of [the covenant of works], we should be accepted with God, and rewarded with him" (V,

²⁴ See Lyle Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); Clark, *idem*, *Casper Olevian*; Richard Muller, "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus A Brakel," in *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Willem Van Asselt, "The Doctrine of the Abrogations in the Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1609-1669)," *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994), 101-16.

²⁵ For example, WCF VII.2; WLC 20, 30; WSC 12. The standards use the terms "covenant of works" and "covenant of life" interchangeably.

²⁶ X, 84. Owen called this life the "supernatural end whereunto he was created."

275). This rule and law, said Owen, was summarized in the command, “Do this and live” (V, 276). If he was to achieve the goal of eschatological life as the head and representative of humankind, Adam had to render perfect, complete, and personal obedience to God, meeting the conditions of the covenant of works.²⁷ Hence,

Two things belonged to this covenant: - First, That all things were transacted immediately between God and man. There was no mediator in it, no one to undertake any thing, either on the part of God or man, between them; for the whole depending on every one’s personal obedience, there was no place for a mediator. Secondly, That nothing but perfect, sinless obedience would be accepted with God, or preserve the covenant in its primitive state and condition. There was nothing in it as to pardon sin, no provision for any defect in personal obedience (V, 276).

This promise of a reward for Adam’s perfect obedience in the covenant of works was the result of God’s condescension and goodness, which Owen sometimes called “grace.”²⁸ One should be careful to understand how Owen used the word “grace” in different contexts. He did not use the word in any soteric sense when speaking of the covenant of works. Trueman makes the important point that “while the Reformed Orthodox will routinely use language of *grace* when referring to this condescension, this is to be understood not in a redemptive sense, for there could be no redemption where there is nothing to be redeemed before the Fall, but simply as underlying God’s freedom in the establishment of the covenant” (Trueman, *John Owen*, 74). For Owen, once God established this covenant through his divine condescension, Adam had a legal claim and right to its reward upon the fulfillment of its conditions. This claim was not the result of an intrinsic merit, but a covenantally determined merit.

With the Fall of Adam and the breaking of the covenant of works, Adam’s sin was imputed to the human race. In his very first book, *A Display of Arminianism* (1643),

²⁷ X, 82ff; XIX, 337; XXIII, 60. While Owen usually referred to the first covenant as a covenant of works, he sometimes identified it as the covenant of creation, life or nature. XXIII, 62; XIX, 388.

²⁸ XIX, 337; XXII, 68. Notice how Owen qualifies this appositionally: “There is infinite grace in every divine covenant, inasmuch as it is established on promises. – Infinite condescension it is in God, that he will enter into covenant with dust and ashes, with poor worms of the earth.”

Owen went to Romans 5.12-21 to show Scripture's teaching on the federal headship of Adam:

The scripture is clear that the sin of Adam is the sin of us all, not only by propagation and communication...but also by an imputation of his actual transgression unto us all, his singular disobedience being by this means ours. The grounds of this imputation...may be all reduced to his being a common person and head of all our nature; which investeth us with a double interest in his demerits, whilst so he was: 1. As we were then in him and parts of him; 2. As he sustained the place of our whole nature in the covenant God made with him; both which, even according to the exigence of God's justice, require that his transgression be also accounted ours. As St. Paul is plain, not only that 'by one man's disobedience many were made sinners,' Rom 5:19, by the derivation of a corrupted nature, but also that 'by one man's offence judgment came upon all,' verse 18 (X, 75).

The disastrous results of the first Adam's failure to fulfill the covenant of works placed humankind under the wrath of God and in desperate need to possess the righteousness that God requires in order to be received into favor and subsequently enjoy the blessed supernatural end for which they were created.

Covenant of Grace

Like the covenant of redemption and covenant of works, the covenant of grace was a doctrine ubiquitous in Reformed Orthodoxy, expressed both explicitly and implicitly in numerous Reformed confessions used in Britain and on the continent during the seventeenth-century.²⁹ The early Reformers' emphasis of unity of the Old and New Testaments over and against the Anabaptists' views of radical discontinuity was not lost on the Reformed Orthodox. Here too, Owen was no exception. Treatment of the covenant of grace is pervasive throughout Owen's more than eighty-volume corpus. In particular, his massive *Exposition of Hebrews* interacts extensively with this covenant. Moreover,

²⁹ See, for example, Westminster Confession of Faith, VII.3-6, XXVII.1; Westminster Larger Catechism, QQ.30-36, 162, 166; Westminster Shorter Catechism, QQ.20, 94; Belgic Confession, Art.34; Heidelberg Catechism Q.74; Canons of Dort, I.17; Formula Consensus Helvetica, XXIII, XXIV.

his sizeable *Theologoumena*, as Mark Jones rightly points out, “is principally a treatise on the covenant of grace as it unfolds progressively throughout the history of revelation.”³⁰

For Owen, the covenant of grace was the result of the covenant of redemption. God sent Christ, in accordance with the covenant of redemption, as the surety for the elect in the covenant of grace. Whereas God made the covenant of works with humans without a mediator, he made the covenant of grace with humans *through* a mediator, namely,

Christ:

In the first covenant made with Adam there was no surety, but God and men were the immediate covenanters; and although we were then in a state and condition able to perform and answer all the terms of the covenant, yet it was broken and disannulled...It was man alone who failed and broke that covenant: wherefore it was necessary, that upon the making of the new covenant...we should have a surety and undertaker for us.³¹

For Owen, the only apostolic meaning of the term “surety” is one who is “an undertaker for another, or others, who thereon is justly and legally to answer what is due to them, or from them.” He is one who “voluntarily takes on himself the cause and condition of another, to answer, or undergo, or pay what he is liable unto, or to see it done; whereon he becomes justly and legally obnoxious [i.e. liable] unto performance.”³² Thus, by

³⁰ Mark Jones, “Covenant and Justification in the Thought of John Owen,” MA thesis (Potchefstroom: North-West University, 2006), 67.

³¹ V, 186. See also his comments on 275-77, as well as X, 82-84; XIX, 337, 388; XXIII, 60-62.

³² V, 182. In using this language, Owen made an argument against the Arminian Grotius (1583-1645), the Socinian Schlichtingius (1592-1661), and the seventeenth-century Anglican theologian, Bishop Hammond (1605-1660), all of whom he explicitly named as asserting just the opposite, viz., that Christ was a sponsor or surety for God, rather than for us (see page 183). Contrary to these claims, Owen maintained that the sponsorship and surety of Christ, as prescribed in the covenant of redemption and applied in the covenant of grace, was directed to God on behalf of sinners, and not to sinners on behalf of God. This was especially important for Owen’s case against the Socinian claim that the imputation of Christ’s active and passive obedience in justification was impossible because Christ accomplished his work (including his death on the cross) for himself and on his own behalf. V, 252-62. Sent as a public person on behalf of others, Christ was not actively obedient to the law for his own sake; he was actively obedient to the law of God for the sake of others. Moreover, all of Christ’s obedience was, ultimately, *active* obedience, even his suffering and death. In some regards, Owen found the debates in his day over the distinction between the active and passive obedience of Christ to be foolhardy, “for [Christ] exercised the highest active obedience in his suffering, when he offered himself to God through the eternal Spirit.” V, 253.

means of his federal theology, Owen clearly outlined the antithetical routes to eternal life, viz., the covenant *without* a surety (works) and the covenant *with* a surety (grace).

The covenant of grace differs “in the essence, substance, and nature of...that first covenant of works” for two reasons:

First, It is of *grace*, which wholly excludes works; that is, so of grace, as that our own works are not the means of justification before God; as in the places before alleged. Secondly, It has a *mediator and surety*; which is built alone on this supposition, that what we cannot do in ourselves which was originally required of us, and what the law of the first covenant cannot enable us to perform, that should be performed for us by our mediator and surety (V, 276).

A sinner’s only hope is the alien righteousness imputed to him through faith alone, which was earned through the active and passive obedience of the One placed under a covenant of works, namely, Christ, the surety and mediator of the covenant of grace.

Owen’s Position on the Mosaic

Having considered the three overarching biblical covenants in Owen’s theology, we now turn to Owen’s position on the Mosaic covenant and its role within the *historia salutis*. This will be done by analyzing Owen’s exegetical comments on Hebrews 8 and looking at three relationships: the relationship of the Mosaic covenant to the covenant of works, to the covenant of grace, and to the new covenant.

Relationship of the Mosaic Covenant to the Covenant of Works

For Owen, the Mosaic covenant was a republication of the covenant of works: “yea, in sundry things it re-enforced, established, and confirmed that covenant”(XXII, 77). Owen provided three examples of how the Mosaic covenant functioned in this capacity. First, he pointed out that the covenant at Sinai “revived, declared, and expressed *all the commands of that covenant in the decalogue* [sic]; for that is nothing but a divine summary of the law written in the heart of man at his creation” (XXII, 77). The basic commands to love God and neighbor, given to Adam and inscribed on his conscience in

the covenant of works, was republished in the treaty document given to the nation Israel at Sinai. Like the covenant of works, the Mosaic covenant required perfect obedience:

And herein the dreadful manner of its delivery or promulgation, with its writing in tables of stone, is also to be considered; for in them the nature of that first covenant, with its inexorableness as unto perfect obedience, was represented. And because none could answer its demands, or comply with it therein, it was called the “ministration of death,” causing fear and bondage, 2 Cor iii.7 (XXII, 77).

Secondly, Owen turned to the covenant sanctions. The Mosaic covenant “revived the *sanction of the first covenant*, in the curse or sentence of death which it denounced against all transgressors” (XXII, 77-8). Just as the Mosaic covenant republished the *commands* of the covenant of works, so too did it republish its *penalty* for disobedience:

Death was the penalty of the transgression of the first covenant: ‘In the day that thou eatest [sic], thou shalt surely die the death.’ And this sentence was revived and represented anew in the curse wherewith this covenant was ratified, ‘Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them,’ Deut. xxvii.26; Gal iii.10 (XXII, 78).

The Sinai covenant, like the original covenant with Adam in the Garden, carried a sanction of death for failure to meet its requirements by perfect obedience. God did this, said Owen, “to bind a sense of that curse on the consciences of men, until He came by whom it was taken away.”³³

Finally, Owen called attention to the promise of the Mosaic covenant upon fulfillment of its conditions. “[The Mosaic covenant] revived the promise of that covenant [i.e. the covenant of works], - *that of eternal life upon perfect obedience*” (XXII, 78). Turning to Romans 10.5, Owen pointed out that this was Paul’s interpretation of the Mosaic covenant:

So the apostle tells us that Moses thus describeth the righteousness of the law, ‘That the man which doeth those things shall live by them,’ Rom. x.5; as he doth, Lev. xviii.5. Now this is no

³³ *Ibid.* See also Owen’s comments on page 81: “By reviving the commands of the covenant of works, with the sanction of death, it put an awe on the minds of men, and set bounds to their lusts, that they should not dare to run forth into that excess which they were naturally inclined into. It was therefore, ‘added because of transgressions;’ that, in the declaration of God’s severity against them, some bounds might be fixed unto them; for ‘by the law is the knowledge of sin.’”

other but the covenant of works revived. Nor had this covenant of Sinai any promise of eternal life annexed unto it, as such, but only the promise inseparable from the covenant of works which it revived, saying, ‘Do this, and live’ (XXII, 78).

For Owen, the Mosaic covenant was not a *new* covenant of works that replaced the original covenant of works and “all the force of it,” but a republication of that original covenant of works in its commands, sanctions, and promises (XXII, 78).

Many of Owen’s fellow Puritans, such as Westminster Divine Thomas Goodwin (1600-1679), used similar language to describe the Mosaic covenant, calling it a “renewing” of the “first covenant,” which was “truly the promulgation of the covenant of nature made with Adam in paradise.”³⁴ Others, however, did not see the same continuity between the covenant of works and Mosaic covenant. Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661), a Scottish Commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, said, “the law as pressed upon Israel was not a covenant of works.”³⁵

This, of course, raises the question: in what sense did Owen understand the Mosaic covenant to be a covenant of works? To answer this question, we must turn to Owen’s view of Sinai’s relationship to the covenant of grace.

Relationship of the Mosaic Covenant to the Covenant of Grace

Owen firmly believed that the covenant of grace remained uninterrupted throughout the period of the Mosaic economy. The covenant of grace began in the *protoevangelium* in its “first promise, given unto our first parents immediately after the fall,” which “had in it the nature of a covenant, grounded on a promise of grace” (XXII, 62). God then made

³⁴ Thomas Goodwin, *The Work of the Holy Ghost in Our Salvation in The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol.5. (Eureka: Tanski, repr.1996), 353-54. See also Peter Bulkeley, *The Gospel Covenant* (London, 1651), 62-63; Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity with Notes by Thomas Boston* (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), 61-64; Samuel Petto, *The Great Mystery of the Covenant of Grace* (1673, Stoke-on-Trent: Tentmaker, repr.2007), 113-152; William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants* (London, 1678), 88.

³⁵ Samuel Rutherford, *The Covenant of Life Opened* (Edinburgh, 1655), 60.

this clearer in his covenant with Abraham, which was, by its very substance, a covenant of promise and not works. When God made his covenant with the nation Israel upon Sinai, it did not annul or interrupt the one unifying covenant of grace beginning with Adam in Gen 3.15 and expanded with Abraham in Gen 12, 15, and 17. “The *church of Israel*,” said Owen, “was never absolutely under the power of that [Mosaic] covenant as a covenant of life; for from the days of Abraham, the promise was given unto them and their seed” (XXII, 62). The notion, promoted by the Socinians, that the gospel was not present during the period of the old covenant, was, for Owen, “senseless and brutish.”³⁶

For Owen, the Mosaic was never intended to justify sinners, since it revived the covenant of works, which is “diametrically opposite” of the promise (XXII, 98). Because of their guilt and corruption, sinners can never fulfill the demands of the law. The only “way of *reconciliation with God*, of justification and salvation, was always one and the same,” namely, through Jesus Christ, the mediator of the covenant of grace (XXII, 71). This included the church as it existed in its national, theocratic form under the covenant of Sinai:

[T]he writings of the Old Testament, namely, the *Law, Psalms, and Prophets*, do contain and declare the doctrine of justification and salvation by Christ. This the church of old believed, and walked with God in the faith thereof. This is undeniably proved, in that the doctrine mentioned is frequently confirmed in the New Testament by testimonies taken out of the Old (XXII, 98).

With his covenantal, redemptive-historical hermeneutic, Owen interpreted the Bible to teach only one way of salvation in the *historia salutis*, namely, salvation *sola gratia, sola*

³⁶ XXII, 98. Owen noted that this was a teaching of the Socinians: “The question is not, What promises are given in the law itself, or the old covenant formally considered as such? but, What promises had they who lived under that covenant, and which were not disannulled by it? for we have proved sufficiently, that the addition of this covenant did not abolish or supersede the efficacy of any promise that God had before given unto the church. And to say that the first promise, and that given unto Abraham, confirmed with the oath of God, were not the promises of eternal life, is to overthrow the whole Bible, both Old Testament and New.”

fide, solus Christus. “For it was always the same, as to the substance of it, from the beginning” (XXII, 74).

What Owen made undeniably clear, however, was that he did not believe the Mosaic covenant was a mere administration of the covenant of grace, but an altogether separate and distinct covenant, subservient to the covenant of grace. Because of the way in which he saw the Mosaic covenant as a republication of the covenant of works, and because of the many places he saw Scripture to speak of “two distinct covenants, or testaments, and such different natures, properties, and effects,” Owen held the Mosaic covenant to be organically independent from the covenant of grace (XXII, 70). One covenant was of grace, the other of law; one covenant was of promise, the other of command. “Wherefore we must grant *two distinct covenants*, rather than a twofold administration of the same covenant merely, to be intended” (XXII, 76). Ultimately, the proof of this was the inability of the Mosaic covenant to save:

If reconciliation and salvation by Christ were to be obtained not only under the old covenant, but by virtue thereof, then it must be the same for substance with the new. But this is not so; for no reconciliation with God nor salvation could be obtained by virtue of the old covenant, or the administration of it, as our apostle disputes at large, though all believers were reconciled, justified, and saved, by virtue of the promise, whilst they were under the covenant (XXII, 77).

Owen did not see his view as being in conflict with Westminster Confession of Faith VII.5, which states the covenant of grace “was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel.” It should be noted that the Savoy Declaration maintained this same language. Owen simply believed the Mosaic covenant to be superimposed upon the covenant of grace. “There was another covenant superadded unto the promises, which was to be the immediate rule of the obedience and worship of the church. And according unto their observance of this superadded covenant, they were esteemed to have kept or broken covenant with God. This was the old covenant on Sinai,

as hath been declared” (XXII, 113). The Mosaic covenant was subservient to the covenant of grace, as a republication of the covenant of works through its commands, sanctions, and reward for obedience, in order to declare the “impossibility of obtaining reconciliation and peace with God any other way but by the promise.”³⁷

Owen’s understanding of this relationship was different from those in his day, such as Francis Turretin (1623-1687), who saw the Mosaic covenant as a legal administration of the covenant of grace but not differing in substance.³⁸ Yet, Owen was not unique in his position. Others in his day, such as Westminster Divine Samuel Bolton (1606-1654), essentially held the same view as Owen.³⁹ Still others, such as the Dutch theologian Herman Witsius (1636-1708) held something very close.⁴⁰

The Relationship of the Mosaic Covenant to the New Covenant

The new covenant was, for Owen, the “confirmation and establishment” of the covenant of grace (XXII, 112). The “newness” of the new covenant is in its variegated distinction to the Mosaic covenant, especially in substance. Owen listed seventeen ways in which these two covenants differed, which, in summary, ran as follows:

³⁷ XXII, 79. Owen continues: “For representing the commands of the covenant of works, requiring perfect, sinless obedience, under the penalty of the curse, [the Mosaic covenant] convinced men that this was no way for sinners to seek for life and salvation by. And herewith it so urged the consciences of men, that they could have no rest nor peace in themselves but what the promise would afford them, whereunto they saw a necessity of betaking themselves.”

³⁸ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1994), 2:203. Turretin recognized, however, that, considered strictly, the Mosaic covenant “denotes the covenant of works” (2:234). Many of the Reformed Orthodox who stated that the Mosaic covenant was of the same substance as the covenant of grace also qualify and nuance their statements in other places so as to recognize some measure of a works principle in the Mosaic covenant.

³⁹ See Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (1645, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, repr. 1978).

⁴⁰ Witsius describes the Mosaic covenant as a “national covenant between God and Israel” which was neither the covenant of works or the covenant of grace, but “a covenant of sincere piety, which supposes both.” Witsius said, “Hence the question, which is very much agitated at this day, may be decided: namely, *Whether the ten words are nothing but the form of the covenant of grace?* This, I apprehend, is by no means an accurate way of speaking.” *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (1677, Kingsburg: den Dulk Christian Foundation, repr. 1990), 186.

1. “These two covenants differ in the *circumstance of time* as to their promulgation, declaration, and establishment” (XXII, 87).
2. “They differ in the *circumstance of place* as to their promulgation” (XXII, 87).
3. “They differ in the *manner of their promulgation* and establishment.” The Mosaic covenant was given by angels and came in a spirit of fear and bondage. The new covenant, on the other hand, came by Christ in “a spirit of meekness and condescension, with the highest evidence of love, grace, and compassion, encouraging and inviting the weary, the burdened, the heavy and laden to come unto him” (XXII, 88-9).
4. “They differ in their *mediators*.” The first covenant had Moses as its mediator, but the second covenant has Christ (XXII, 89).
5. “They differ in their *subject-matter*, both as unto precepts and promises.” Whereas the new covenant was of grace, the old covenant was of works, for it “renewed the commands of the covenant of works, and that on their original terms.” The discontinuities between the two covenants are so antithetical that it is impossible to reduce the old covenant to a mere administration of the covenant of grace. “The old testament, absolutely considered, had no promise of grace to communicate spiritual strength, or to assist us in obedience.” What it promised had to do with “temporal things in the land of Canaan *inseparable from it*” (XXII, 89-90).
6. “They differ, and that principally, in the *manner of their dedication and sanction*.” Whereas the old covenant was confirmed by the bloodshed of animals,

- whose blood was sprinkled on the people, the new covenant was confirmed “by the sacrifice and blood of Christ himself” (XXII, 90).
7. “They differ in the *priests* that were to officiate before God in the behalf of the people” (XXII, 90).
 8. “They differ in the *sacrifices* whereon the peace and reconciliation with God which is tendered in them doth depend” (XXII, 90).
 9. “They differ in the *way and manner of their solemn writing or enrollment.*” The old covenant was written on tables of stone in accordance with ancient treaties, but the new covenant is written in the heart.⁴¹
 10. “They differ in their *ends.*” The goal of the old covenant was to discover, condemn, and set bounds to sin. The goal new covenant, however, is “to declare the love, grace, and mercy of God; and therewith to give repentance, remission of sin, and life eternal” (XXII, 94).
 11. “They differed in their *effects.*” Owen quoted Rom 8.15; 2 Cor 3.7, 9, 17; Gal 4.1-7, 24, 26, 30, 31; and Heb 2.14, 15 in support of the discontinuity between the old and new covenants with regard to the bondage and servitude of the former and the Spirit-wrought liberty of the latter. Because the old covenant was a ministry of death and condemnation, “the people saw not how the commands of that covenant could be observed, not how its curse could be avoided...All the prospect they had of deliverance was from the promise.” The new covenant, on the other hand, gives

⁴¹ XXII, 91. While it is unclear how much knowledge Owen had of suzerainty treaties in the ancient Near East, he clearly understood that “all covenants were of old solemnly written in tables of brass or stone, where they might be faithfully preserved for the use of the parties concerned. So the old covenant, as to the principal, fundamental part of it, was ‘engraven in tables of stone,’ which were kept in the ark, Exod. xxxi.18; Deut. ix.10; 2 Cor. iii.7. And God did so order it in his providence, that the covenant contained in them should be broken, to imitate that the covenant contained in them was not everlasting nor unalterable.”

- freedom from the condemning power of the law as well as the whole ceremonial system of worship.⁴²
12. “They differ greatly with respect unto *the dispensation and grant of the Holy Ghost.*” While the Holy Spirit was granted to believers under the old covenant, “there was always a promise of his more signal effusion upon the confirmation and establishment of the new covenant.”⁴³
 13. “They differ in the *declaration made in them of the kingdom of God.*” The old covenant was geo-political and earthly, “consisting in empire, power, victory, wealth,” whereas the kingdom of God revealed in the new covenant is “internal, spiritual, and heavenly” (XXII, 96).
 14. “They differ in their *substance*...the old covenant was typical, shadowy, and removable, Heb x.1. The new covenant is substantial and permanent, as containing the body, which is Christ” (XXII, 96).
 15. “They differ in *the extent of their administration, according unto the will of God.*” The old covenant was essentially for the Jew, whereas the new covenant extends to all nations (XXII, 96-7).
 16. “They differ in their *efficacy*; for the old covenant ‘made nothing perfect’” (XXII,97).
 17. “They differ in their *duration.*” The old covenant was only for a temporary period until the inauguration of the new covenant, which is eternal.

⁴² XXII, 91-95. Owen elaborated on this point, furnishing a total of fifteen sub-points in three sets.

⁴³ XXII, 95-6. Owen saw the difference of the Holy Spirit’s activity in the old and new covenants not only as one of degree and quantity, but also of quality: “It is certain that God did grant the gift of the Holy Spirit under the old testament, and his operations during that season,” yet, “so sparing was the communication of the Holy Ghost under the old testament, compared with his effusion under the new, as that the evangelist affirms that ‘the Holy Ghost was not yet, because that Jesus was not yet glorified,’ John vii.39, that is, he was not yet given in that manner as he was to be given upon the confirmation of the new covenant.”

While Owen believed that one could add more examples of discontinuity to his list, he trusted that these points alone were enough to show that the unifying nature of the covenant of grace did not warrant a flattening-out of redemptive history:

For some, when they hear that the covenant of grace was always one and the same, of the same nature and efficacy under both testaments, - that the way of salvation by Christ was always one and the same, - are ready to think that there was no such great difference between their state and ours as is pretended. But we see that on this supposition, that covenant which God brought the people into at Sinai, and under the yoke whereof they were to abide until the new covenant was established, had all the disadvantages attending it which we have insisted on. And those who understand not how excellent and glorious those privileges are which are added unto the covenant of grace, as to the administration of it, by the introduction and establishment of the new covenant, are utterly unacquainted with the nature or spiritual and heavenly things (XXII, 97-98).

Owen's view differed from those in his day who held the old and new covenants to be the same in substance. John Ball (1585-1640), for example, said, "Most Divines hold the old and new Covenants to be one in substance and kind, differing only in degrees."⁴⁴ Yet, even Ball had to concede, in light of the New Testament's frequent language of discontinuity between the old and new covenants, "how all these differences should stand, if they be not covenants opposite in kind, it is not easy to understand" (Ball, *Covenant of Grace*, 95-96).

In sum, Owen believed the Mosaic covenant to be a republication of the covenant of works, superimposed upon, subservient to, and organically independent from the covenant of grace, and distinct from the new covenant in substance and essence.

Implications for Justification *Sola Fide*

Having considered Owen's position on the Mosaic covenant, we now reflect on the implications this had for his doctrine of justification *sola fide*. Jeon rightly points out that "in Owen's discussion of salvation and justification, the principles of works and grace along with the covenants of works and grace are *absolutely antithetical*" (Jeon, *Covenant*

⁴⁴ John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (London, 1645), 95.

Theology, 55). It is in the covenant of grace that Christ came as “a surety and undertaker for us,” fulfilling that work given to him by the Father in the covenant of redemption (V, 186). One of the important results of Christ’s fulfilled work on our behalf is the imputation of his righteousness to us, which includes his active obedience as well as his passive obedience. Anything less than the imputation of the active and passive obedience of Christ would leave the sinner under the condemnation of the covenant of works:

It is one of the very first notions in the Christian religion, that the Lord Christ was given to us, born to us; that he came as mediator, to do for us what we could not do for ourselves, and not merely to suffer what we had deserved. And here, instead of our own righteousness, we have the “righteousness of God” instead of being righteous in ourselves before God, he is “The LORD our Righteousness.” And nothing but a righteousness of another kind and nature, unto justification before God, could constitute another covenant. Wherefore, the righteousness whereby we are justified is the righteousness of Christ imputed unto us, or we are still under the law, under the covenant of works (V, 277).

Owen made it clear that Christ’s passive obedience imputed to the believer was not enough for a right standing before God. “The obedience of Christ unto the law,” said Owen, “and the imputation thereof unto us, are no less necessary unto our justification before God, than his suffering of the penalty of the law, and the imputation thereof unto us, unto the same end.”⁴⁵ Because the covenant of works commands, “Do this and live,” Owen believed that “we have need of more than the mere sufferings of Christ, whereby we may be justified before God.”⁴⁶ Mere pardon and acquittal is not enough.⁴⁷ Only

⁴⁵ V, 252. Because, for Owen, the imputation of Christ’s active obedience was a necessary component of the doctrine of justification, it deserved more specific wording than previously afforded by the Westminster Confession. The Savoy Declaration modified the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith on justification (i.e. Chapter XI). It replaced the words, “but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them” with the words, “but by imputing Christ’s active obedience to the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness.”

⁴⁶ V, 254. Owen continued, “but the whole law of what I intend it, that Christ’s fulfilling of the law, in obedience unto its commands, is no less imputed unto us for our justification than his undergoing the penalty of it is.”

⁴⁷ V, 263. Aware of the debates within the Reformed churches of his day, he believed that his Puritan contemporaries who had deviated from this doctrine not only departed from Scripture, but from “the ancient doctrine of the church of England.” V, 164. On page 63, Owen said, “There hath been a controversy more directly stated among some *learned divines* of the Reformed churches (for the Lutherans are unanimous on the one side), about the *righteousness of Christ* that is said to be imputed to us. For some

perfect righteousness merits God's approval. Jeon is correct to say, "the radical distinction between the covenant of works and grace safeguards Owen's teaching of justification by faith alone, in which an alien righteousness (*iustitia aliena*) achieved by Christ Jesus is imputed to believers" (Jeon, *Covenant Theology*, 55).

As we have seen, however, this radical distinction also applied to Owen's position on the Mosaic covenant and its relationship to the covenant of grace, especially its new covenant manifestation. Sinai revived and republished the summary command of the covenant of works, viz., "Do this and live." Again, the following quote from Owen is worthy of consideration:

It revived the promise of that covenant, - *that of eternal life upon perfect obedience*. So the apostle tells us that Moses thus describeth the righteousness of the law, 'That the man which doeth those things shall live by them,' Rom. x.5; as he doth, Lev. xviii.5. Now this is no other but the covenant of works revived. Nor had this covenant of Sinai any promise of eternal life annexed unto it, as such, but only the promise inseparable from the covenant of works which it revived, saying, 'Do this, and live' (XXII, 78).

In the very next sentence, Owen pointed out that when the apostle Paul drew his contrast between law and gospel for justification, he spoke of the Mosaic covenant in terms of the covenant of works:

Hence it is, that when our apostle disputeth against *justification by the law*, or by the works of the law, he doth not intend the works peculiar unto the covenant of Sinai, such as were the rites and

would have this to be only his *suffering of death*, and the satisfaction which he made for sin thereby, and others include therein the *obedience of his life* also." For Owen, the former had clearly strayed from the English Reformation. Included among his critique was Richard Baxter (1615-91), whose 1649 *Aphorisms of Justification* (London, 1649) denied the imputed active obedience of Christ, affirmed justification through an obedient faith, and sharply criticized Owen's 1647 work, *The Death of Death*. Baxter and Owen engaged in an ongoing debate over the doctrines of atonement and justification. As for believing this to be a deviation from the English Reformation, Owen said on pages 164-65, "Especially the church of England is in her doctrine express as unto the *imputation of the righteousness* of Christ, both *active and passive*, as it is usually distinguished. This hath been of late so full manifested out of her authentic writings, - that is, the *articles of religion*, and *books of homilies*, and other writing publicly authorized, - that it is altogether needless to give any father demonstration of it. . . Wherefore, in what I have to offer on this subject, I shall not in the least depart from the *ancient doctrine of the church of England*; yea, I have no design but to declare and vindicate it, as God shall enable. . . the life and continuance of any church on the one hand, and its apostasy or ruin on the other, do depend in an eminent manner on the preservation or rejection of the truth in this article of religion; and, I shall add, as it hath been professed, received, and believed in the church of England in former days."

ceremonies of the worship then instituted; but he intends also the *works of the first covenant*, which alone had the promise of life annexed unto them (XXII, 78).

Thus, for Owen, a confusion of the old and new covenants was a confusion of law and gospel, works and grace.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Owen believed the Mosaic covenant to be a republication of the covenant of works, which was superimposed upon, subservient to, and organically independent from the covenant of grace. For Owen, this made the Mosaic covenant distinct from the new covenant in substance and essence, and not a mere administration of the covenant of grace. While not all federalist theologians agreed with Owen's position, his view was certainly not unusual or eccentric for his time. Other confessional, scholastic theologians in the era of high orthodoxy held the same or a similar view. Moreover, Owen's fundamental distinction between the old and new covenants, stemming from his contrast between the covenants of works and grace, protected his understanding of justification *sola fide* and the imputation of Christ's active obedience to the believer.

⁴⁸ See also V, 341-56.

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