

**Review of Carl Trueman “Atonement and the Covenant of Redemption: John Owen on the Nature of Christ’s Satisfaction,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*.**

**BY David Allen.**

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The final chapter in the historical section concerns John Owen’s dependence upon the concept of the Covenant of Redemption in his famous defense of definite atonement. Noted Owenic scholar Carl Trueman does the honors.

The chapter is well structured. Following an introduction, Trueman addresses the historical context of the debates between Baxter and Owen, followed by a discussion of the so called “covenant of redemption” as a linchpin in Owen’s argument for limited atonement. Even though these issues are somewhat theologically technical, Trueman keeps the discussion relatively accessible. When he uses Latin phrases, he explains their meaning clearly.

Trueman reminds us that “competent proponents” of definite atonement don’t generally argue from a few isolated texts, but rather from the “implications of a series of strands of biblical teaching, from the foundations of redemption in the intra-Trinitarian relationship...” (202).

This is a noteworthy statement since it underscores the fact that there are no direct, overt, statements in Scripture affirming Christ died only for the sins of the elect. Given this fact, proponents of definite atonement must operate on the “theological” level more so than on the “exegetical” level. Definite atonement is more of a theological deduction from Scripture and less an exegetically demonstrated construct.

Trueman acknowledges criticism of Owen from a number of Reformed scholars, but states he does not intend to revisit these; rather, he seeks “to tease out the way in which Owen’s treatise indicates the interconnections that exist between various soteriological points” (203).

Truman plunges us into the deep waters of the debates between Richard Baxter and Owen over the nature of justification and the atonement.

Sympathetic to Owen, Trueman quotes one of the most important passages in Owen on the nature of the sufficiency of the atonement as reflected in the famous Lombardian formula. Trueman fails to take historical note of the late 16th and early 17th century revision of the Lombardian formula.

John Owen was conscious of the fact that he and others were revising Lombard's formula and preferred to put it in hypothetical terms: "the blood of Christ was sufficient to have been made a price for all" [emphasis mine].<sup>1</sup> This reinterpretation on his part and others was designed to support Owen's argument for definite atonement. Richard Baxter called Owen's revision of the Lombardian Formula a "new futile evasion" and he refuted Owen's position thoroughly.<sup>2</sup> There are many examples of this revision in the writings of high-Calvinists at the time. Note also that Cunningham acknowledged this revision in his well-known *Historical Theology*.<sup>3</sup>

Trueman next turns to a discussion of Owen's concept of the "covenant of redemption" (212-222). The notion of a "covenant of redemption" is a 17th century construct of Federal Theology. The covenant of redemption is an attempt to ground an *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) in the Trinity to undergird the certainty of fulfillment. It is the foundation of Owen's support for definite atonement.

The covenant of redemption can be outlined as follows:

1. God promises to Christ success in gaining the salvation of the elect.
2. This promise is the sole goal which the Son achieves and intends to achieve via the atonement. Thus – definite atonement.
3. The Son agrees to be the constituted representative of the elect.
4. A new relation between the Father and the Son is the basis of the Son's subordination to the Father in work of redemption.
5. The incarnation is only undertaken with special saving reference to the elect.

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<sup>1</sup> John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Goold (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1852), 10:296.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Baxter, *Universal Redemption of Mankind by the Lord Jesus Christ*, (London: Printed for John Salusbury at the Rising Sun in Cornhill, 1694), 343–45.

<sup>3</sup> William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (Carlisle, PN: Banner of Truth, 1994), 2:332.

Trueman explains for us Owen's trajectory of thinking from the Covenant of Redemption to his position that the death of Christ secures the "causal basis for all the conditions attached to salvation for the elect," including the purchase of faith for the elect (220-21). For Owen, there can be no universality of extent and particularity in application (222).

The eternal intention of the covenant of redemption causes Owen to interpret all potentially universalist statements concerning the extent of the atonement in the light of the covenant of redemption. Thus, "world" becomes for Owen "world of the elect." Owen presupposes since all are not saved, all were never intended by God to be saved. Hence, Christ died only for the elect. Game, Set, Match.

For whatever reason, Trueman offers no biblical justification for the Reformed notion of the Covenant of Redemption, or for Owen's concept of faith as a purchase at the cross. In the eleven pages where he discusses the covenant of redemption, there is a paucity of biblical references. By my count there are only four biblical references in this entire section, three of which occur in a single quotation of Owen (218), and even here Trueman states Owen is making an "implicit" appeal to the terms of the covenant of redemption.

The covenant of redemption is a theological concept with no biblical evidence or justification.

Furthermore, it would have been helpful had Trueman summarized the major arguments of those within the Reformed tradition, as well as those without, who find no biblical justification for either the covenant of redemption or the purchase of faith for the elect.<sup>4</sup>

For Owen, supposed biblical evidence comes from three primary places in the New Testament. First, Jesus' obedience to the will of the Father as expressed in the Gospel of John is taken to suggest a covenant of redemption in the Godhead in eternity past. Second, the statement in Luke 22:29 at the last supper is supposed to indicate the covenant of redemption. But here it is clear Christ is speaking of his fulfillment of the new covenant, not the covenant of redemption. Third, passages such as Hebrews 7:22; 10:5-7; and 12:24 are construed as support for the covenant of redemption. But here again, all these passages speak of the new covenant, as context makes clear.

Owen's a priori assumption behind the covenant of redemption is that all covenant relationships involving promise and obedience are covenant relationships from eternity. Nowhere is this stated in Scripture.

There is a raft of theological problems here, most of which Trueman does not address. I shall mention ten.

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<sup>4</sup> As, for example, Neil A. Chambers, "A Critical Analysis of John Owen's Argument for Limited Atonement in the Death of Christ" (Th.M. Thesis, Reformed Theological Seminary, 1998).

1. There is no covenant within the Godhead revealed in Scripture. All covenants in Scripture are between God and men. What we have here is the positing of legal dealings within the Godhead – the Father demanding payment; the Son making the payment.
  
2. Covenants imply a prior state of non-agreement. How this could be posited within the Trinity is difficult to conceive. Oddly enough, Trueman speaks of the universal atonement position as creating dissonance in the Trinity. Actually it is just the opposite.
  
3. The covenant of redemption is a legal construct, but Scripture reveals Christ's atonement on the cross was based on love, not a legal agreement.
  
4. One might query where is the Holy Spirit in this eternal contract?
  
5. Scripture teaches that Christ's incarnation is in the stead of all humanity, not just the elect.
  
6. All temporal covenants mentioned in the Bible are subordinated to the covenant of redemption. The focus is on God's so called secret or decretal will rather than his revealed will, which is where Scripture focuses.
  
7. Those like Owen who posit a covenant of redemption have a tendency to work from eternity into time. What is most speculative becomes the controlling element undergirding all else. This creates a tenuous connection with Scripture, and is problematic.
  
8. When one reads Owen, it is obvious that the covenant of redemption structure is introduced prior to his examination of Scripture. His theological presupposition controls his exegesis.

9. There is a hermeneutical fallacy in this process. Promises made to the Messiah in the Old Testament are made to reflect promises made to the Son in eternity. Yet there is no Scriptural basis for this.

10. Those like Owen who affirm the covenant of redemption state that the elect have a legal right to salvation both as to means and ends. How does this not destroy the principle of grace in salvation?

For Owen and the covenant of redemption, all the biblical terms for salvation such as “ransom,” “reconciliation,” “redemption,” etc., must be understood as references only the elect. In this approach, to die for = to save. It is simply not possible that Christ can be said to have died for the sins of anyone who is not ultimately saved.

These concerns notwithstanding, Trueman’s chapter is a helpful summary of Owen’s thought on the covenant of redemption and definite atonement.

Trueman’s chapter concludes the historical section of the book. I offer the following as summary thoughts, impressions, and suggestions on the seven chapters in the historical section.

1. There are some helpful chapters here, especially with respect to Dort, Amyraut and Owen.

2. Haykin, Hogg, and Helm reflect inadequate historiography in their chapters.

3. The historical section ends in mid-17th century. There is no reckoning with the major debates within the Reformed tradition from that time through the end of the 20th century.

4. There is no acknowledgment of the many within the Reformed tradition who did not hold to definite atonement, including many first generation Reformers, Puritans, the Marrow men, the Welsh controversy, Jonathan Edwards, the New Divinity; the 19th century triumvirate of Hypothetical Universalist systematic theologians Charles Hodge, Robert Dabney, and W. G. T. Shedd, and a slew of Reformed theologians and exegetes in the 20th century.

5. Also glaringly absent is any treatment of the rise and extent of hyper-Calvinism in the 18th and 19th century, or acknowledgment that one cannot become a hyper-Calvinist without an extreme commitment to definite atonement and its corollaries. Though a commitment to definite atonement is not hyper-Calvinism, all hyper-Calvinists hold to definite atonement. Hyper-Calvinism cannot exist without definite atonement.

6. Finally, the historical section fails to clearly indicate the fact that the Hypothetical Universalist position within Reformed theology antedated both definite atonement and Amyraldianism.