

John Owen and Federal Theology

By Rev. Steve Griffiths

The idea of a covenant relationship, which formed the basis of federal theology, was foundational to much Reformed theology in the seventeenth-century. As we shall see below, this scheme of thought was subject to a variety of interpretations. Despite these differences however, John Ball spoke for perhaps the entire tradition when he outlined the reasoning behind such an approach. Covenant between man and God is needed

First that the creature might know what to expect from the Creator . . . Secondly, that the same creature might always recognise and acknowledge what to retribute. Thirdly, such manner as dealing suites best withe the nature of the reasonable creature, and his subordination to the Almighty.¹

Federal theology was understood by many to provide the key to the interpretation of Christian experience. This is certainly the case in Owen's writings. He was unequivocal in his belief that these covenants made between man and God are agreements that form the basis of any subsequent relationship.²

By way of introduction, we would do well to note that Owen's federal reading of Scripture reflected not just the shape of the biblical material but also elements within contemporary society. The feudalism of medieval society was disintegrating at a rapid rate, not least in England where the existence of itinerants, travellers and vagabonds had become an increasing part of modern-day life.³ The bonds of contract between master and servant were becoming increasingly obsolete which, in part, was resulting in instability and a lack of social cohesion. The need for order and a sense of personal responsibility was considered paramount in preventing civilised society coming apart at the seams.⁴ The Puritan response, in part, was to internalise that sense of discipline.

We must not underestimate Owen's concern for order in matters spiritual. Order was at the heart of his ecclesiology such that his desire was for "*the church [to] render the worship itself in its performance more decent, beautiful, and orderly.*"⁵ Most vitally, order is at the very heart of God and this sense of order is fundamental to federal theology.⁶

¹ J. Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*, 1645, p. 6.

² Owen, *Psalm CXXX*, VI.470; *The Death of Death*, X.168; *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance*, XI.210; *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, XIX.77, 78, 82;

³ XXIII.55

⁴ For an excellent treatment of this topic, see C. Hill's chapter 'Masterless Men' in *The World Turned Upside Down* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 39ff.

⁵ S. Doran and C. Durston analyse the role of the church in this regard in their chapter 'The Church and Social Control', *Princes, Pastors and People* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 174ff.

⁶ Owen, *A Brief Instruction*, XV.467 (italics his).

The exact theological development of federal theology is a complex issue. It is not our purpose to examine the history of this in any real depth but only inasmuch as it relates to Owen's own thought. Nevertheless, a brief overview does pave the way for us to realise the remarkable way in which Owen was able to draw threads from differing traditions and hold them together in a coherent and logical system.

Initially, we are bound to recognise the fundamental difference between the federal theology of the English Reformed tradition in juxtaposition to that of the Continental Reformers. Whilst federal theology was foundational to Continental Reformed theology, it was not linked in the same way to matters of conscience.⁷ This differing emphasis in English federalism may perhaps be accounted for by the fact that it developed, to an extent, independently of Continental theology. Tyndale had expressed a primitive concept of federal theology as early as 1528.⁸ For him, God and humanity are integrally linked by a covenant relationship that has obligations on both parties.

The relationship between covenant and contract is one that has been much debated, especially concerning the Continental development of federal theology. Trinterud's identification of the apparent polarisation between Calvin and Olevianus on the one hand and Luther and Bullinger on the other hand⁹ is a faulty reading of history, as Bierma has shown.¹⁰ The notion that Genevan Reformers taught a unilateral and unconditional covenant relationship whilst the Rhineland Reformers taught a bilateral contractual relationship appears to be an untenable idea. The Continental Reformers were acting largely independent of Tyndale.¹¹ Greenhough suggests that, because of chronological and geographical considerations, the cross-fertilisation of thought amongst Reformers could have occurred between Luther and Tyndale and between Luther and Calvin but not between Tyndale and Calvin. Given these restrictions, however, they were developing a similar approach to federalism, namely that the covenant relationship incorporates both a unilateral and a bilateral dimension.¹²

Federal theology had become foundational for English Reformed thinking by the seventeenth-century and Owen's own ministry. This was the result of the amalgamation of both the independent development of the English tradition and a reflection of Continental thought. The strands of thought informing contemporary Reformed thinking were varied indeed. Concerning the specific influences on Owen's concept of federalism, more will be said below. Suffice it necessary at this point only to mention that the bilateral approach was fundamental to Owen's understanding of the doctrine.

The nature of this covenant relationship, then, was understood in the same manner throughout the Reformed movement of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries. Where there was less agreement, however, was on the number of covenants made between man and God.

⁷ Owen, *Of Communion with God*, II.75f

⁸ R. A. Muller, 'Covenant and Conscience in English Reformed Theology,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 42 (1980): 309.

⁹ Tyndale, *The Mammon*, in *Works* I, p. 105f.

¹⁰ Leonard J. Trinterud, 'The Origins of Puritanism,' *Church History* 20 (1951): 37-57.

¹¹ L.D. Bierma, 'Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions?' *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983) 304-321.

¹² G.H. Greenhough, 'The Reformers' Attitude to the Law of God,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 39 (1976): 86.

Clearly there is much within Calvin's teaching to suggest that he was working within a covenantal framework.¹³ Indeed, if that were not there, it would be difficult to account for the rise of a developed form of federal theology within the Calvinist tradition, initially through the *Summa theologiae* of Ursinus, within two decades of the Swiss Reformer's death. Nevertheless, the covenant of works, which was a fundamental aspect of Owen's federalism, was absent from Calvin's teaching. The idea that God made a covenant with Adam that guaranteed eternal life in return for his work of obedience was not something which Calvin elucidated. For him, there is only one covenant: the covenant of grace that stands for all time: "God has never made any other covenant than that which he made formerly with Abraham, and at length confirmed by the hand of Moses."¹⁴

It was in the Westminster Confession of Faith that the Reformed notion of federal theology was given official sanction in England.¹⁵ The development of, and perhaps the departure from, the teachings of Calvin is clear in this document. The idea of two covenants was outlined, namely a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. It must be stressed, however, that the Westminster Confession was not the first to propose this idea. It had already been cited in 1594 by the Dutch supralapsarian Franz Gomarus in his *Oratio de foedere Dei*, although he did not offer a systematised federalism.¹⁶ Whilst Gomarus did not specifically speak of covenants of works and grace, it has been proposed that his *foedus gratiae* and *foedus supranaturale* are the same concepts in form if not in name.¹⁷ Karl Barth, in *Church Dogmatics*, attributes the conception of the twofold covenant understanding directly to Ursinus.¹⁸

The covenant of works in the Westminster document was understood to be based on the divine law which had been revealed to Adam; a covenant which remains foundational to any relationship with God.¹⁹ Whilst this two-fold notion of covenant was understood well by some, there were inherent dangers in the teaching as proposed by others. Baxter, for example, became guilty of 'neonomianism' in the manner of his understanding; the covenant of works was understood by him to be something that demands an inherent principle within humanity capable of achieving the ends that are proposed.²⁰ This teaching was clearly at odds with Calvin, who understood the gracious acting of God in the individual to give the power of adherence to the covenant relationship.²¹ But the question remains, however, whether the introduction of a

¹³ L.D. Bierma, 'Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions?' p. 321 (italic his).

¹⁴ Anthony A. Hoekema has analysed this aspect of Calvin's writings in his article, 'The Covenant of Grace in Calvin's Teachings' *Calvin Theological Journal*. See also Bierma, 'Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions?' p. 313f.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on Jeremiah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989), 31:31-34.

¹⁶ *Westminster Confession of Faith* Chapter Seven.

¹⁷ The place of Gomarus in the development of federal theology is considered by Lynne Courter Boughton in her article 'Supralapsarianism and the Role of Metaphysics in Sixteenth-Century Reformed Theology', *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986): 63-96 and also by Karl Barth in *Church Dogmatics* IV.1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), p. 59.

¹⁸ See D. J. Bruggink's contribution to *An Elaboration of the Theology of Calvin*, ed. R. Gamble (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 37f.

¹⁹ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1 p.59

²⁰ *Larger Catechism*, question 93

covenant of works inevitably leads to the barbarising of covenant theology inherent in Baxter's approach, or whether there may be a way to harmonise Calvin's one-covenant idea with a more developed understanding.

Owen shows us that there is a better way. Certainly his teachings on federal theology far surpassed, in complexity, those of the Westminster Confession and revealed an extension to Calvin's approach. What Owen was able to do, however, was hold in tension the intent of Calvin with the development of Westminster. Unlike Calvin, Owen understood the logically primary covenant to be one of works. The key to his understanding of this was revealed more clearly on other occasions where he called it the covenant of creation, life or nature.²² He believed that "man in his creation, with respect unto the ends of God therein, was constituted under a covenant."²³ In this covenant, Adam was "encouraged unto obedience"²⁴ to God as the basis of that constitution and, indeed, as the basis of his entire relationship with God.²⁵ But what is important here is that Owen recognised the grace of God at work within human nature enabling us to obedience. The covenant is not conditional or dependent upon any good work within the natural abilities of man but it is entirely dependent on the grace of God. By taking this approach to the subject, the intent of Calvin's covenant of grace was upheld and the error of Baxter's neonomianism was avoided. The initial covenant is one in which both works and grace are inextricably intertwined.

Yet as much as God's grace is at work in this covenant, Owen understood it to be marked with the ordinance of worship and response to God on the part of man.²⁶ It was Adam's failure to keep this covenant of works that brought guilt and condemnation upon the human race, since the first man is our federal head and we are co-joined with him in our relationship with God.²⁷ In the light of that failure by Adam, and its ensuing consequences for humanity, there was the need for a second covenant. This second covenant is most properly called the covenant of grace. This, however, is not a covenant that is made directly with humanity in itself but with a Mediator on its behalf, namely Jesus Christ. It is an "everlasting covenant"²⁸ in which "God hath himself undertaken the whole"²⁹ in as much as the conditions attached to it devolve on the Mediator himself.³⁰

For Owen, this covenant of grace is itself founded upon a third covenant, that of redemption; an idea which is pivotal to his entire federal system. This is the result of a

²¹ Baxter, *Aphorisms of Justification*, p.47f.

²² Calvin, *Institutes*, (2 vols. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1963), III.17.5, p.107f.

²³ Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, XIX.388; XXIII.62

²⁴ Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, XIX.337

²⁵ Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, XIX.337

²⁶ Owen, *The Person of Christ*, I.183 (italics his).

²⁷ Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, XIX.337

²⁸ Owen, *The Death of Death*, X.354

²⁹ Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, XXIV.475

³⁰ Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance*, XI.210

transaction in eternity between the Father and the Son;³¹ a transaction which was itself a covenant: “Christ’s . . . mediation on our behalf . . . is 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.”³² The covenant of redemption was a logical necessity in Owen’s thought if the covenant of grace is to benefit the elect.³³ The atonement for sin made by Christ is dependent on this pre-existent covenant between the first two members of the Trinity. The promises annexed to this covenant are made by God to Christ in his capacity as Mediator, namely that he will be exalted and glorified as a reward for his atoning sacrifice. Owen suggested that it is only in the context of this covenant that meaning can be given to the death of Christ and the subsequent pardoning of sinners. The background to Owen’s understanding of this will be examined more fully below.

Ferguson rightly recognises that Owen spoke of a further covenant that finds its basis in the events on Mount Sinai.³⁴ Whilst Owen accepted that man is unable to please God through the broken covenant of works,³⁵ the precepts of that covenant are renewed at Sinai: “The law thus declared and written by him was the same, I say, materially, and for the substance of it, with the law of our creation, or the original rule of our covenant obedience unto God.”³⁶

It is only because man was unable to be saved under the first covenant that God introduced salvation by grace. Such a comment, however, seems to suggest that God somehow failed in the first covenant. But Owen’s approach does not materially differentiate between the covenants. Certainly there is a *logical* differentiation but all of them are infused with the grace of God. Owen spoke of the differing covenants as ‘renovations’ of the first covenant of works.³⁷ Ferguson comments on this paradox thus: “In one sense then, the people were under the covenant of grace, and yet in a dispensation governed by the principles of the covenant of works. To employ Owen’s own expressions, there is ‘renovation’ and ‘innovation’ together.”³⁸

Whether there be, in strict accordance to Calvin only one covenant, or in accordance with the Westminster Confession two covenants or whether, as with Owen, more are accepted, there need not be cause for division. Owen pointed the way forward in remaining true to both Calvin and Westminster in principle whilst developing the teachings of both in practice. What remained for Owen was the fundamental importance of this teaching to our understanding of the relationship between humanity and God.

³¹ *Westminster Confession*, Chapter VII, sec. III

³² Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, XIX.77

³³ Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ* XII.496f.

³⁴ The scriptural basis for this is indicated by the Father/Son relationship within the Trinity; Psa.16:2; 22:1; 40:8; 45:7; Mic. 5:4; John 20:27; Rev.3:13 are all cited by Owen in this regard.

³⁵ S. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), p. 27

³⁶ Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, XIX.387

³⁷ Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, XIX.388; cf. VIII.293, XXIII.215

³⁸ Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, XIX.389

Given the extension of his thought from the Westminster Confession of Faith concerning federal theology, we are left with the question of exactly how and why Owen came by his ideas. Was his thought truly unique or is there a hidden source which needs to be uncovered in order more adequately to assess the validity of Owen's approach? In answering that question we discover that Owen was far from unique in his ideas and that he relied in no small degree directly on the formative work of his Continental contemporary, Johannes Cocceius. Even though, as we have seen, the idea predates him, the term 'federal theology' is generally connected to his 1648 work *Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento Dei* and it is in his writings that the concept found its first systematic exposition.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Owen should have been attracted to the writings of Cocceius; they shared a similar desire to confound the Socinians in print as well as a love for the Epistle to the Hebrews. But Owen's was more than a passing interest and what is apparent is that he had studied Cocceius' writings very carefully. In the records of his library auctioned after his death, we find that Owen possessed no fewer than five of Cocceius' works.³⁹ Furthermore, Owen followed Cocceius' teaching about the sacramental nature of the two trees in the Garden of Eden⁴⁰ and, most importantly for our purposes, had referred the reader to his writings on the Book of Job in *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*.⁴¹ It is the nature of that referral that is important for us, since it has to do with the relationship between the Father and the Son from all eternity. The issue under discussion for Owen at this juncture of his treatise was the obedience and submission of Christ to the Father: "All along, in the carrying on of his work, he professes that this condition [of submission and obedience] was by his Father prescribed him, that he should be his servant, and yield him obedience in the work he had in hand."⁴² After this, he quotes from Job 33:23,24 and refers the reader to Cocceius on the topic. The link between Owen's thought and that of Cocceius on federal theology is implicit in this. At the very heart of Cocceius' system was the eternal covenant made between the Father and the Son; what Owen called the covenant of redemption. This covenant was, of course, dependent on the submission of Christ to the will of the Father, the very issue that Owen had stressed in *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*.

As was mentioned above, the covenant of redemption was a logical necessity for Owen in the development of his federal theology; there is a sense in which his whole system stands or falls on the validity of this proposal. The debt that Owen owed to Cocceius for the development of his theological framework, then, is incalculable. We may note in passing that it is perhaps no coincidence that Owen outlined his understanding of the covenant of redemption in two primary works, his *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ* and his *Epistle to the Hebrews*. Should we be surprised that his drawing on the ideas of Cocceius is most clearly evident in the two strands of theology that most

³⁹ Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, XIX.388; cf. VIII.293, XXIII.215

⁴⁰ Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, XIX.389

⁴¹ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, p. 29

⁴² Cocceius, *Commentarius in Jobum, continens Expositionem Verborum ex Hebraismi proprietate, &c.* (1644), *Examinatio Apologiæ Equitis Poloni de Sociniana Smal &c.* (1656), *Ejusd. Consideratio Princip. Evang. Joh. Ch. V.19. contra Socinum, Smal &c.* (1654), *Ejusd. Compendiolum Socinianismi confutatæ* (1651) and *Ejusd. Explicatio in Epistolam ad Hebraeos & Veritat.*

closely bound them: their desire to confute Socinianism (the reason for the penning of *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*) and their love of that biblical epistle?

In conclusion, what becomes clear in our analysis of Owen's approach to federal theology is the incredible ability he had to intertwine seemingly polarised schemes of thought and create a logical, coherent system. The depth of his loyalty to the Reformed tradition is not open to question. Owen had a deep and profound understanding of the nuances of Reformed thinking. In bringing that to his teaching on federal theology, Owen was well equipped to develop a strong foundation for his system of thought that penetrated contemporary society and has much to say to us today.