

John Owen's Doctrine of the Trinity in Its Catholic Context and Its Significance for Today

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Introduction

Works Dealing with Owen

Owen has attracted a fair amount of scholarly attention, although not perhaps as much as he deserves. The past thirty-five years have seen accounts of his life by Peter Toon, his theology of the Christian life by Sinclair Ferguson, his trinitarian theology by Carl Trueman, and his Christology by Richard Daniels.¹ I will pass over the details of his life, which I imagine are well known to many of you.²

Main Works in which He Deals with the Trinity

Carl Trueman has demonstrated that the doctrine of the trinity is crucial for the whole of Owen's theology.³ We will be dealing here with his doctrine of the trinity *as such*, setting it in the context of the historic discussions of the Christian Church, both East and West. In 1650, Owen published his great work on the atonement, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, rooting the high priestly ministry of Christ—and the atonement in particular—on a trinitarian basis, seen in the eternal counsels of God, which Owen describes as the covenant of redemption. Since the idea of the *pactum salutis* was new, advocated first in developed form by Cocceius only two years earlier, this is undeveloped in comparison with his later exposition of the theme. In the *Vindiciae Evangelicae, or the Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism Examined* (1655), a painstaking and tedious work, Owen refutes the early English Unitarian, John Biddle, point-by-point, in the course of which he rebuts the Racovian Catechism (1605) of the Socinians, as well

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¹P. Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1971); S. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987); C. R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998); R. W. Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004).

²Born 1616 at Stadhampton, near Oxford. Graduated from Oxford University in 1632, at the age of 16. Ordained deacon in 1635 and began the study of theology. After two years he left, owing to the increasing power of William Laud, and became the personal chaplain and tutor to Sir Robert Dormer of Ascot. Moved to London in 1642, at the start of the Civil War. His first book, *A Display of Arminianism*, published in March. Married. Eleven children, only one of whom survived to adulthood. Minister at Fordham in Essex. 1646 preached to Parliament and moved to a pastorate in Coggeshall, Essex. By now convinced of Congregationalism. In 1648 preached to the troops of General Fairfax, leading Parliamentary General, as well as—again—to Parliament. Met Cromwell, who made him his chaplain—and so he accompanied Cromwell to Ireland and Scotland. In 1651 Cromwell, now Chancellor of Oxford University, appointed Owen Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, and in 1652 Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University. A constant stream of publications was flowing from his pen. With Cromwell's death in 1658 Owen began to fade from the public scene. He played a leading role in the Congregational Synod at the Savoy Palace in 1658. Following the restoration of the monarchy, he was one of the two thousand ministers ejected from their churches and livelihoods in 1662. Fortunately for Owen he was a man of means, had an estate at Stadhampton and a place in London, continued to preach and write and had a congregation in London. His wife died in 1676, he remarried within two years and died in 1683.

³Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*.

as some of the writings of the Dutch jurist and theologian Hugo Grotius.⁴ Two years later he produced his remarkable book, *On Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, each Person Distinctly*. Since this is an edited form of the substance of sermons he had preached to his Coggeshall congregation at least six years earlier, these ideas had been present in Owen's thought for some time but were marinated as he wrote, edited, and published them. This is an especially valuable work, worth serious and detailed perusal, reflection, and appropriation. Rather later comes his massive *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1668–84). Included in this is an exercitation in which Owen expounds the federal relations between the Father and the Son in more detail than his earlier discussion in *The Death of Death*. Finally, there is his more popular, quickly produced—but for that reason important, since it is his distilled mature thought—and short work, *A Brief Declaration and Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1669).

Besides these volumes, devoted specifically to the trinity, there are other works of direct relevance, in which material of immediate connection to the trinity can be found. *On the Person of Christ; Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ; Discourse on the Holy Spirit; On the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer; On the Holy Spirit and His Work*, are obvious; but also in his *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* he connects the work of Christ and the imputation of Christ's righteousness in justification with the trinity.

The Catholic Context

Richard Muller, in the fourth volume of his *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, places the Reformed Orthodox, Owen included, in context of the Western tradition,⁵ but we should recall that the doctrine of the trinity was forged in the East, in the Greek-speaking church. Foundational is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, dating from the first Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.), which resolved the Arian and Eunomian crisis. Arius had taught that the Son was divine and made the world, but in turn was created by God, who became Father in so doing. The church replied at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) that the Son was not a creature but was begotten by the Father and so is co-eternal, of the same identical being as the Father.⁶

Nicaea did not solve the crisis; it propelled it to the next stage. Labyrinthine complexities lurked at every corner. The language did not then exist to distinguish the way God is three from the way he is one. Terms were used interchangeably and with a variety of meanings. Only with the Cappadocians—Basil in particular—backed by Athanasius, did agreement emerge to use the word *ousia* for God's indivisible being, and *hypostasis* for the three. Eunomius, a much more

⁴ Lelio Sozzini (1525–1562) and his nephew Faustus Sozzini (1539–1604) were the founders of a movement, based in Poland and Lithuania, that had at one time upwards of two hundred churches. Rakow in Poland was the hub for forty years after the death of Faustus. It was there that the Catechism was produced in 1605, with a German translation following three years later. The movement spread to Germany and Holland. Socinians were expelled from all countries, although penalties against them were rarely enforced. It infiltrated England in the 1630s through John Hales and William Chillingworth, and the Catechism was translated into English in 1652, possibly through John Biddle. For Socinianism the trinity is contrary to reason and Scripture. Matter is co-eternal with God, who is limited in space and has no foreknowledge of future events. Christ is human and has no pre-existence. The Holy Spirit is simply the power of God and has no distinct personal identity. The cross has only an exemplary role, while salvation comes through human obedience to Christ's commands, Original sin is rejected. Adam was naturally mortal. There is no hell. Those not saved will be annihilated. Christianity must be consistent with reason.

⁵R. A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Ca. 1520 to Ca. 1725: Volume Four: The Trinity of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

⁶R. Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2004), 108–126.

weighty theologian that Arius, had revived the earlier heresy, and others denied that the Holy Spirit was God. At root these people argued from human experience to God, concluding that since a man becomes a father with the generation of his son, who has no prior existence, so the Son came to be, at which point God became Father.

What Constantinople I did was to affirm that God is one and indivisible; that the Son and the Holy Spirit, as well as the Father, are God in the fullest sense, and so are to be worshipped; that all three work together indivisibly in creation and redemption; and that there are certain relations between the three that do not divide God's indivisible being.⁷ Later, John of Damascus was to apply the term *perichoresis* to refer to the mutual indwelling of the three.⁸ In Gerald Bray's imagery, they occupy the same divine space.⁹

In the Latin West, Augustine (354–430) wrote a classic exposition of the proNicene doctrine, *De Trinitate*.¹⁰ As Lewis Ayres has recently demonstrated, Augustine shared the basic insights and teaching of the Cappadocians. Attempts to pit Augustine against the Greeks are exaggerated.¹¹ However, there are some significant differences that later in the West would create a gulf with the East. Augustine's basic premise was the unity of God's being, or essence, and the indivisibility of his works. He had some difficulty doing justice to the distinctness of the persons, particularly the Holy Spirit. In the last half of the book he seeks some evidence in creation of how one thing can be expressed in three distinct ways without its unity being undermined. The problem for him is preserving the unity. This quest for created illustrations had been explicitly rejected as impossible by the greatest of the Cappadocians, Gregory of Nazianzus.¹²

In later centuries this difference of outlook found expression in the *filioque* controversy. The West, with its premise of the unity of the divine being, and wishing to underpin the deity of the Son, argued—following Augustine—that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*, in one act, an addition to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed. The East, seeking to maintain the monarchy of the Father, insists that he proceeds from the Father. It considers the West to verge on modalism by confusing the Father and the Son.¹³

Western Trinitarianism

Most radically and influentially in Western thought, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), in his *Summa contra Gentiles*, and also in his *Summa Theologiae*, separated his discussion of the one God from that of the trinity. In *SCG* the whole of Book One considers the existence, nature, and attributes of God, while the trinity is relegated to Book Four. The same pattern follows in *ST*, although the two are consecutive rather than separated. Of particular note is that *ST* begins with an emphatic discussion of the simplicity of God.¹⁴ This is an important doctrine, axiomatic, taught by the East (Gregory of Nyssa, John of Damascus) as well as the West. It teaches that God is one being, indivisible. He cannot be separated into parts. But with Aquinas, so dominant is the theme it becomes difficult to account for the three persons. With the strong priority of the

⁷Ibid., 127–183.

⁸Ibid., 237–242.

⁹G. Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 158.

¹⁰Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 184–200.

¹¹L. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹²Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration 31*: 7–8.

¹³Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 201–220.

¹⁴T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1a, Q.2.

essence—the essence is before the persons—a fundamentally *impersonal* doctrine of God results. Bearing in mind the immediate threat of Islam in the thirteenth century, this is most unfortunate.¹⁵ Aquinas' pattern is followed in most Western discussions of the doctrine of God.¹⁶ Joseph Farrell has argued that this originated in neoPlatonism's doctrine of the One, imported by Augustine,¹⁷ but recent discussion of Augustine and neoPlatonism has undermined this thesis. Besides, the simplicity of God was taught by all. However, what is striking in Aquinas is the place he gives it and the emphasis he places on it. He goes as far as to equate the being of God and his attributes—due to his doctrine of simplicity, the will of God is identical to and indistinguishable from his being. This would lead logically to a doctrine of the necessity of creation, or to the coeternity of matter (both of which Aquinas denies).

However, a century earlier Peter Lombard (c. 1100–1160), Bishop of Paris, in his *Libri Sententiae*, had propounded a thoroughly trinitarian doctrine of God. Of the forty two distinctions in the first of the four books of the Sentences the first thirty-four are on the trinity. This was the standard textbook in the Western schools right up to the Reformation. Aquinas was a powerful force and would eventually dominate. Nevertheless, Lombard still faces the basic problems bequeathed by Augustine and comes up with answers very much like Aquinas was to do—because of his simplicity God is identical to his attributes; citing Augustine he says “Voluntas et potentia Dei Deus ipse est.”¹⁸

John Calvin follows Lombard rather than Aquinas, in making his doctrine of the trinity his doctrine of God. In Book One of the *Institute* his discussion of God is simply focused on the trinity. His consideration of the existence and attributes of God is, in comparison, quite meagre.¹⁹ However, as Muller has correctly argued, the bulk of the Reformed Orthodox follow the traditional Western line of thought seen in Aquinas.²⁰

Main Features of Owen's Trinitarianism

Owen is not so much an innovator as a brilliant synthesizer. His trinitarianism is classic and orthodox in the Western sense but he avoids some of its problems. One of the ways he achieves this is by his overwhelmingly biblical approach. There is a remarkable absence of philosophical terminology, a profusion of biblical exegesis.

1. *He sums up, for a popular readership, the basic lineaments of trinitarian doctrine as follows:* God is one; this one God is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; the Father is the Father of the Son; the Son is the Son of the Father; and the Holy Ghost is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Thus it follows that the Father is this one God; the Son is this one God; and the Holy Ghost is this one God.²¹

Against the Socinians' arguments against the eternity and deity of the Son he replies that the Father is termed the Father in relation to the Son, and so if the Son was not pre-existent

¹⁵Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 228–237; C. Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God: An Investigation in Aquinas' Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 187–269.

¹⁶ See the Systematic Theologies of, *inter alia*, Charles Hodge and Louis Berkhof.

¹⁷Saint Photios, *The Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit* (J. P. Farrell; Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1987) introduction.

¹⁸P. Lombard, *Sententiae in IV Libris Distinctae* (Romae: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas Grottaferrati, 1971) Bk., 1 Distn. 19.

¹⁹J. Calvin, *Institute*, 1:13:7–29.

²⁰Muller, *PRRD*, 4:17–140.

²¹W. H. Goold, *The Works of John Owen* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965–68), 2:387–388.

neither could God be called the Father during the OT.²² In turn, the distinct persons do not prove a difference of essence between the Father and the Son, nor does distinction and inequality of office detract from their equality and sameness of essence and nature. (This had been the riposte of the proNicenes, that the name Son—and the doctrine of eternal generation—denotes identity of nature). Similarly for Owen, the advancement and exaltation of Christ as mediator is consistent with his essential dignity as God, while his humanity does not deny his deity.²³ He bases his refutation on a plenitude of Biblical texts—both in *Vindiciae Evangelicae* and *Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity*. Noticeable by its absence is a reliance on Aristotle.

In contrast to the Socinian denial of the personality of the Holy Spirit—they themselves recognized that if they were to concede his personality his deity would follow—Owen cites many biblical texts to prove that “the Holy Spirit is an eternally existing divine substance, the author of divine operations, and the object of divine and religious worship.”²⁴ The Spirit is a divine, distinct person, placed in the same series as other divine persons, and is not merely the power of God.²⁵ The three are distinct “by certain relative properties”—a phrase reminiscent of Calvin’s “by certain characteristic properties”²⁶—and, Owen says, “the nature of this distinction lies in their mutual relation one to another.”²⁷ The three delight in each other.²⁸

Just like the Arians and Eunomians of the fourth century, the Socinians paraded a regard for the Bible, opposing the use of extra-biblical terminology. Like the Cappadocians and Calvin before him, Owen stresses that the Fathers’ terms convey the sense of Scripture; they are “expository of what is so contained.” To deny this on the pretext of reverence for Scripture is to render Scripture useless.²⁹

2. *Owen is Western—thoroughly committed to the filioque.*³⁰ As Trueman notes, this secures a Christological center to theology and piety. Gerald Bray has remarked that without the *filioque* evangelical faith is inconceivable.³¹ Leaving aside classical and pagan authors, whom he cites often but not inordinately so—Aristotle on only a handful of occasions—in *On Communion* Owen makes 44 clear citations of church theologians. Augustine leads with 10, then comes Aquinas 7, Tertullian 5, Gregory of Nazianzus 4, and Beza 3. The West outstrips the East by 39–5. Patristic sources account for 27 citations, the medievals 7, while the Reformation and immediate post-Reformation period has 10. Overwhelmingly, most quotations are from the Bible—to count them would be a monumental waste of time.

3. *Yet his focus is on the three persons, which is more characteristic of the East.* As Meyendorff points out, in contrast to the dominant stress in the West on the one divine essence, the East’s trinitarianism has been shaped by the three persons, with the Father as the source of the personal subsistence of the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the classic Latin trinitarian doctrine “God is essentially one, except in the divine *Persons*, who are defined in terms of *relations*. In Byzantine thought, however—to use an expression from Maximus the Confessor—“God is identically monad and triad,” and there is probably a tendency in both worship and philosophical

²²Ibid., 2:381.

²³Ibid., 2:388–389.

²⁴Ibid., 2:399–400.

²⁵Ibid., 2:400–403.

²⁶Ibid., 2:405; Calvin, *Institute*, 1:13:22.

²⁷Goold, *Works*, 2:406.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., 2:379; Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration 31*:3, 21–3; Calvin, *Institute*, 1:13:7–29.

³⁰ See Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 120–1.

³¹G. Bray, “The Filioque Clause in History and Theology,” *TB* 34 (1983): 139–44.

formulations . . . to give a certain pre-eminence to personal diversity.”³² Owen’s own emphasis on the three persons is most notable in *On Communion with God*. He understands communion as “. . . the mutual communication of such good things as wherein the persons holding that communion are delighted, bottomed upon some union with them.” So union with Christ is foundational to the communion we have with the trinity. Thus “our communion . . . with God consisteth in his *communication of himself unto us, with our returnal unto him* of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that *union* which in Jesus Christ we have with him.”³³ On this basis, the book consists of an extensive and detailed exposition successively of the communion we have with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

So strong is Owen’s focus on the three persons consecutively that the casual reader, not knowing his theology, might accuse him of tritheism, were it not for a couple of paragraphs where he recognizes the danger and makes clear statements to assuage it:

When I assign any thing as *peculiar* wherein we distinctly hold communion with any person, I do not exclude the other persons from communion with the soul in the very same thing. Only this, I say, *principally*, immediately, and by the way of eminency, we have, in such a thing, or in such a way, communion with some one person; and therein with the others *secondarily*, and by the way of consequence on that foundation; for the person, as the person, of any one of them, is not the prime *object* of divine worship, but as it is identified with the nature or essence of God.³⁴

Here Owen follows the principle of appropriations whereby particular actions are attributable to one or other person of the trinity but, since the works of the trinity are indivisible, all three persons are in some way or other involved. Thus there is “no act of divine worship yielded unto him . . . but they are distinctly directed unto Father, Son, and Spirit.”³⁵ Owen safeguards himself against the possible criticisms “By asserting this distinct communion, which merely respects that order in the dispensation of grace which God is pleased to hold out in the gospel, I intend not in the least to shut up all communion with God under these precincts . . . nor to prejudice that holy fellowship we have with the whole Deity.”³⁶ These caveats remind us of the charges Gregory of Nyssa had to refute in his *On “Not Three Gods,”*³⁷ but also need balancing by Gregory of Nazianzus’ paradigmatic statement in his *Oration on Holy Baptism*: “No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendour of the three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one.”³⁸

For Owen, the distinct communion we have with the three persons of the trinity is founded on the Father communicating all grace “by way of *original authority*,” the Son “by way of making out a *purchased treasury*,” and the Holy Spirit “by way of *immediate efficacy*.”³⁹ Compare this with Calvin who explains that to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity,

³²J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979) 180–184.

³³Goold, *Works*, 2:8–9.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 2:18–219.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 2:15.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 2:19.

³⁷*NPNF* 5:26–7, 331–6 (*PG* 45:115–136).

³⁸Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration on Holy Baptism* 40: 41 (*PG* 36:417).

³⁹Goold, *Works*, 2:17.

to the Son the ordered disposition of all things, while to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity.⁴⁰

According to Owen, our communion with the Father consists principally in our response to his love, which elicits “a peculiar delight and acquiescing in the Father.”⁴¹ Our distinct communion with the Son is with him as our mediator, in response to his grace. Union with Christ consists firstly in Christ’s assumption of the substance of human nature, which has no subsistence of its own (the dogma of *enhypostasia* affirmed by Constantinople II); the communion of attributes in the person of the Son (classic catholic Christology); and the execution of his office of mediation in his single person, in respect of both natures. In short “he hath a fitness to save, having pity and ability, tenderness and power, to carry on that work to the uttermost; and a fulness to save, of redemption and sanctification, of righteousness and the Spirit; and a suitableness to the wants of all our souls.”⁴² In short, Owen takes the developed post-Chalcedonian Christology of Constantinople II and Constantinople III and applies it rigorously to Christian piety—a superb example of a synthesis of metatheoretical constructs, catholic exegesis and dogma, and practical pastoral piety. In this he is more in line with Calvin and Lombard than Aquinas. Note how Calvin deals with the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit successively in Book 1 of the *Institute*. Owen shows—as I have said elsewhere—something of an Eastern cast in this respect; borne out perhaps by a number of volumes of Palamas in the sale catalogue of his library.⁴³

Finally, our communion with the Holy Spirit focuses on his actions—his working effectually, giving, glorifying Christ, and as a seal, and an earnest. Owen uses Ephesians 2:18 as the crux. In each act of adoration and worship, all three persons are adored and worshipped. Our access is to the Father, through Christ, by the Holy Spirit; when any one person is worshipped the whole Godhead is worshipped. Thus, we are distinctly to worship the Holy Spirit, and in doing so we worship the whole trinity.⁴⁴ This reminds us of the statement about the Spirit in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed—“who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified.”

4. *Owen avoids the dangers of Aquinas’ doctrine of the divine simplicity.* God is free and sovereign, so his will is not coterminous with his essence. This is clear in his teaching on the antecedent necessity of the atonement. Willing it, it was necessary; but it was not necessary that he will it. In Exercitation XXVIII on Hebrews he writes, “Let none, then, once imagine that this work of entering into covenant about the salvation of mankind was any way necessary unto God, or that it was required by virtue of any of the essential properties of his nature, so that he must have done against them in doing otherwise. God was herein absolutely free, as he was also in his making of all things out of nothing.”⁴⁵ Here Owen has shifted from his earlier work, *The Death of Death*, where he stated that the eternal acts of his will do not really differ from his unchangeable essence.⁴⁶

5. *He integrates the eternal counsel of God with covenant, atonement, and justification.* Owen is one of the first exponents of the theologoumenon, the covenant of redemption, and by

⁴⁰Calvin, *Institute*, 1:13:18.

⁴¹Goold, *Works*, 2:19–231.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 2:51–52.

⁴³ According to Carl Trueman, in a personal remark.

⁴⁴Goold, *Works*, 2:269–70.

⁴⁵W. H. Goold, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850–55), 19:86.

⁴⁶Goold, *Works*, 10:20.

far the best.⁴⁷ He relates all aspects of classic trinitarian doctrine to it and guards against misunderstandings in a way that is seldom repeated and never bettered.

Discussing the eternal trinitarian counsel concerning our salvation, he remarks

these were carried on “per modum foederis,” “by way of covenant” . . . between the Father and the Son; for although it should seem that because they are single acts of the same divine understanding and will, they cannot be properly federal, yet because those properties of the divine nature are acted distinctly in the divine persons, they have in them the nature of a covenant. Besides, there is in them the supposition of the *susception of our human nature* into personal union with the Son. On the consideration thereof he comes to have an absolute distinct interest and to undertake for that which is his own work peculiarly. And therefore are these counsels of the will of God, wherein lies the foundation of the priesthood of Christ, expressly declared as a covenant in Scripture.⁴⁸

He points out that the word “covenant” is used in a variety of ways in Scripture, including synechdochally for the law, and also for an absolute promise (Is. 59:21).⁴⁹ “An absolutely complete covenant is 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.” Required are distinct persons, a voluntary decision about things in their power, for the mutual content and satisfaction of the persons involved.⁵⁰ Where anything is distinctly required of one party three elements are present: a proposal of service; a promise of reward; and an acceptance of the proposal. This introduces an inequality and subordination—he who prescribes is superior to he who observes the prescriptions.⁵¹ “Of this nature is that divine transaction that was between the Father and the Son about the redemption of mankind.”⁵²

The Father and the Son were distinct persons and, Owen concludes, their relations were of a federal nature. John 14:28, Jesus’ comment, “My Father is greater than I” was expounded by the Fathers as referring, against the Arians, to Christ’s human nature. But this, Owen argues, would be so obvious as to need no explanation. “But our Saviour speaks with respect unto the covenant engagement that was between the Father and himself as to the work which he had to do.” No more is intended than that the person of the Son is *of* the person of the Father.⁵³

At the same time, the will of the Father and the will of the Son concurred in this matter—as the covenant was voluntary and of choice. It is seen in the authority of the Father in issuing commands to the Son as incarnate for the discharge of his work.⁵⁴ “Let none, then, once imagine that this work of entering into covenant about the salvation of mankind was any way necessary unto God, or that it was required by virtue of any of the essential properties of his nature, so that he must have done against them in doing otherwise. God was herein absolutely free, as he was

⁴⁷ This was first foreshadowed by C. Olevian, *De Substantia Foederis Gratuiti Inter Deum et Electos* (Geneva, 1585) and given extended treatment for the first time by Johannes Cocceius, *Summa Doctrina de Foedere et Testamento Dei*, in his *Opera Theologica*, 8 vols. (Amsterdam, 1673).

⁴⁸Goold, *Works*, 19:77.

⁴⁹Ibid., 19:80–81.

⁵⁰Ibid., 19:82–83.

⁵¹Ibid., 19:83.

⁵²Ibid., 19:84.

⁵³Ibid., 19:84–85.

⁵⁴Ibid., 19:86.

also in his making of all things out of nothing.” Whatever we may afterwards assert about the necessity of satisfaction to his justice upon the supposition of this covenant “yet the entering into this covenant . . . is absolutely resolved into the mere will and grace of God.” The will of the Son was distinct—he undertook voluntarily to unite human nature “for what is spoken of the second person is spoken with respect unto his purpose to assume our nature, for the obedience whereof, in all that was to be done upon it or by it, he undertook.”⁵⁵ So the Father loved us and gave his Son to die for us: while the Son loved us and gave himself for us, and washed us in his own blood. “And whatever is expressed in the Scripture concerning the will of the human nature of Christ, as it was engaged in and bent upon its work, it is but a representation of the will of the Son of God when he engaged into this work from eternity.”⁵⁶

Owen recognizes the problem this creates for trinitarianism. The will of God is one. Will is a predicate of nature; thus Christ has two wills but God only one. How can it be said that the will of the Father and the will of the Son concur distinctly in this covenant? Owen is aware of the difficulty, in a way Hodge is not. His answer is that the persons act reciprocally towards each other—they know and mutually love each other⁵⁷ as they act and will distinctly by virtue of their mutual in-being (the classic patristic teaching of perichoresis, or mutual indwelling of the three persons in the one divine being).⁵⁸ “The will of God as to the peculiar actings of the Father in this matter is the will of the Father, and the will of God with regard to the peculiar actings of the Son is the will of the Son; not by a distinction of sundry wills, but by the distinct application of the same will unto its *distinct acts* in the persons of the Father and the Son.”⁵⁹ In this the covenant differs from a pure decree. In turn, the atonement is given meaning by this covenant.⁶⁰

EXCURSUS: Differences between Owen and the Westminster Assembly

It is interesting to speculate on the impact Owen might have had at Westminster if he had been a few years older and so have been among its members. There are a few clearly different nuances in Owen compared to the Assembly’s documents.

1. *Owen, like Calvin and Lombard, has foremost the three persons.* This is seen notably in *On Communion with God*, as we have described. It is also expressed in his formulation of the covenant of redemption. In contrast *The Westminster Confession of Faith* 2:1–2 is devoted to the one God, and not until 2:3 is the trinity mentioned—after a full consideration of the attributes of God. This is the typical Western approach to the trinity. The definition in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q.4—“God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth”—could be shared by an Orthodox Jew. This, despite the Westminster Assembly being clearly within Niceno-Constantinopolitan theology.⁶¹

In part, this can be explained by the context. In mid-seventeenth century England, life was lived in the fast lane. The main threat in the 1640s, when the Assembly met, was from antinomianism. It was a constant preoccupation; a committee was formed, petitions brought to Parliament, books burned. However, the antinomians were, for the most part, trinitarian and some in the Assembly itself were sympathetic to some of their teaching. Ten years later, a new

⁵⁵ Cf., Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 4:20:27; *PL* 42:862–863.

⁵⁶Goold, *Works*, 19:87.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 19:88.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 19:89.

⁶¹ Contra R. L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (New York: Nelson, 1998), 338–341.

enemy had emerged. Socinianism was a most radical form of anti-trinitarianism, denying almost every doctrine of the Christian faith. Its attacks on the doctrine of the trinity thrust it into the foreground in a way that had not been so earlier.

This difference with Westminster can be exaggerated—Owen’s role in the Savoy Declaration puts this in perspective; it was effectively *The Westminster Confession of Faith* with changes to fit Congregational polity. Moreover the Westminster Assembly was by no means a monolithic body, tolerating a surprisingly wide range of opinion on a number of important matters—far wider than seen in Owen.

2. *A move towards individualism is noticeable in Owen.* Owen remarks, when dealing with communion with the persons of the trinity, on “the condition of a soul that finds not the wonted presence of Christ in its private and more retired inquiries,—dull in prayer, wandering in meditations, rare in thoughts of him.” Basing his teaching on allegorical exegesis of the Song of Solomon, “the soul addresses itself unto the want of Christ:—when it finds him not in any private endeavours, it makes vigorous application to the ordinances of public worship; in prayer, in preaching, in administration of the seals, doth it look after Christ.”⁶² The order here is first private devotions, then if that fails, the ministry of the Word and sacraments, as a second back up alternative. Communion with God is firstly a private matter. This is a significant move away from the classic Reformed confessions, expressed in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q.88.

Assessment of the Impact of Owen’s Trinitarianism

1. *His focus on the three persons* was and is missing from the West in general. It is vital for restoring a full-blooded trinitarian faith. On the other hand, in this he exhibits an over-reliance on allegorical exegesis of the Song of Solomon in *On Communion*; not that an allegorical Christocentric interpretation of the Song of Solomon is illegitimate, despite attempts in the last century to rule it out—it is simply that this seems to me to be an inadequate basis for such an important argument. To counter that, it could be said that this is a relationship (worship of the trinity) that transcends the purely didactic and argumentative; and I will support this in a moment.

2. *His integration of covenant of redemption, the atonement and justification.* Owen integrates the eternal counsel of God, described as a covenant, with the atonement and justification, providing the context within which both have meaning. In this, he handles the covenant of redemption better than others. However, it is a binitarian construction. Amazingly, the Holy Spirit receives no mention! This, despite Owen’s focus elsewhere on the Spirit. This binitarian structure is presented in more exaggerated form by A. A. Hodge, the covenant taking on the appearance of a divine committee meeting, at which the Holy Spirit is out to lunch.⁶³ Here is a graphic portrayal of the great weakness of Augustine and the West on the Holy Spirit—subordinated and depersonalized as merely the bond of love between the Father and the Son.

Moreover, the question has to be asked as to whether a federal relation between the Father and the Son divides the indivisible trinity? According to the proposal, the Father makes promises to the Son, the Son agrees to discharge certain duties and receive the promised blessings upon completion of his task. The persons enter into judicial relations with each other. It implies that such relations are needed to unite them. Owen is aware of the danger and provides

⁶²Goold, *Works*, 2:130.

⁶³A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 371–2.

answers (unlike others who seem unaware of the problems with a formulation that has received no classic confessional status).⁶⁴

3. *Owen still has difficulties with the persons, betraying his Western roots.* In the *Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, he writes: “The *distinction* which the Scripture reveals between Father, Son, and Spirit, is that whereby they are three hypostases or persons, distinctly subsisting in the same divine essence or being. Now, a divine person is nothing but the *divine essence, upon the account of an especial property, subsisting in an especial manner.*” Later in the same paragraph he refers to “a distinct principle of operation.”⁶⁵ Owen inherits the difficulties of the Western church, where a divine person is understood by Aquinas as “a subsistent individual of a rational nature,” as merely a subsistent relation.⁶⁶

At the same time, this is as much due to the impossibility of defining persons. The human person is made in the image of God, who is incomprehensible, and so shares an element of incomprehensibility on a creaturely level. However, the Eastern approach has greater merit here, dealing with the revelation of the three in the Bible as given, following the way we come to know them in salvation. After all, while we relate to an *object* by definition, to a *person* it is more appropriately through recognition and communion. Hence knowledge of God the trinity is grounded in worship.

4. *For today, Owen may be able to help us in our interaction with Islam* (and evangelism in general). It is vital to know the doctrine of the trinity if a credible account of the Christian faith is to be given to an informed and potentially hostile audience. The doctrine of the trinity is true. It reflects who God is, and so sheds light on the world he has made. Named in baptism according to dominical precept, it is determinative from the start of the Christian life. The prime thrust of apostolic gospel proclamation was that Jesus Christ is Lord, given in the power of the Holy Spirit. Apart from other considerations, it has heuristic value. We need “clear blue water” between the Christian doctrine of God (his new covenant name of “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”) and the expression, “the one true God,” which muddies the waters with ambiguity. Owen helpfully points out that the Christian doctrine of the unity of God differs from that of the Socinians, since God’s unity is triunity; so too in dialogue with Muslims, Jews, and others, the trinity sets the Christian gospel apart and immediately draws attention to Christ, who he is and what he has done.

5. *Owen’s doctrine of the trinity can be a major stimulus to churchly and personal piety.* According to the NT, prayer, and worship are distinctively trinitarian. We have access to the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:18, John 4:21–24). God’s new covenant name is the one name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19–20). Yet if we were to take a random sample of half a dozen people in each of our churches and ask them what relevance the trinity has for their daily lives, we would for the most part likely meet with much blank incomprehension. If that is so, does it not show a defectiveness at the heart of the Christian experience of many in conservative and Reformed churches—to say nothing of the theology that has engendered it?

Owen can help us remedy this, for ourselves and our hearers, in instilling a vivid and living awareness of our triune God. Read or re-read his work on communion with God, meditate on it, pray with it, and allow the biblical truth it contains to saturate your mind, your preaching,

⁶⁴ See the extended discussion of the *pactum salutis* in G. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (H. Bekker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 161ff.

⁶⁵ Goold, *Works*, 2:407.

⁶⁶ Aquinas, *ST* Pt.1, Q.29, Art. 1–2, 4.

your liturgy. As the East found back in the fourth century, our knowledge of God the trinity is grounded in worship, our knowledge rooted in recognition and communion.

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