

The Benefit of Having a Worthy Opponent

How the Theology of Seventeenth-Century Puritans Can Be Complemented by the Nineteenth-Century German Thought Known as the Mercersburg Theology

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CHAPTER THREE

John Owen on Justification

Having now begun to hear Mercersburg's thought that Puritan ideas of justification are composed of abstract imputation and not on real union with Christ, as opposed to the Mercersburg perspective that justification involves a participation in the life of Christ and is more than forensic, this chapter's content will include the Puritan John Owen's understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith. Owen (1616-1683) produced *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*.

That work begins with an address "To the Reader" which states that the purpose of the author's work on justification was to clarify the doctrine and to move readers to obedience to God.¹ He stated that the objective doctrine of grace is open to abuse in the hearts of those who lack subjective grace. Such people have corrupt minds and are consumed by vicious habits.²

A professed Christian who considers the Bible seriously must become confident that God's wrath is by some means turned away and that guilt can be removed in order that eternal life may be received. From the very beginning Owen sets clearly the boundaries of the path He will teach from the Bible – that the grounds for freedom from guilt and the curse of sin is Christ's obedience, righteousness and satisfaction alone which is imputed to those who have faith in Christ alone. Neither faith itself, nor repentance, a program of self-improvement and religious habits, nor any type of good works can procure for anyone acceptance by God.³ Yet the Bible is full of urgings that God's people be devoted to all of those. The tension begins to form in that there is plainly nothing in an individual which can lead to being acquitted before God, but yet those works are necessary. In light of the overall thesis of Owen's work, his statement "As Job justified himself, and

¹ John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2013 [originally published 1677]), pp. 4-5.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

was justified by his works, so we allow it is the duty of every believer to be,"⁴ does not seem to fit. Yet a sufficient explanation is developed within his work that clarifies that when the Bible alludes to justification by works, that those works are the evidence of faith which is the only true means of justification. Job laid aside all confidence in himself and called himself vile. He abhorred himself and repented of his rottenness.

The author cited such a recognition of one's depravity, alienation from God, inability to keep the law and helplessness against the power of sin as prerequisites for those who would be saved.⁵ Those who fail to recognize these elements will tend toward a works-oriented model of salvation and will miss the true significance of Christ's sacrifice or the Spirit's work of regeneration. Such persons have not experienced the terror of the Lord and foster a sense of self-sufficiency within themselves. Even in the present day, many who can profess to be saved by faith alone in Christ alone do not show an obvious daily dependence on God or a reverence for God borne out of any experience of the terror of God. The doctrine of justification by faith alone as Owen presents it should lead to a lifestyle of intolerance toward sin and humility before God who alone can provide righteousness which leads to blessing. He said, "Until men know themselves better, they will care very little to know Christ at all."⁶ The more one realizes personal helplessness to produce good works and how deeply affected are the emotions, the closer he comes to finding freedom in Christ.

Owen's flow of thought could be summarized by Psalm 69:29, 32 which says, "But I am poor and sorrowful; Let Your salvation, O God, set me up on high." "The humble shall see this and be glad; And you who seek God, your hearts shall live." The opposite of this joyful tone would be a warning such as is found in Jeremiah 8:12 where Israel had forgotten to blush and was no longer acquainted with her own shame, and so instead of turning to God for salvation would be punished and consumed. Owen said that when people become numb to personal guilt and divine holiness, the end is atheism or indifference toward all religion.⁷ Conviction of sin must precede expression of justifying faith.⁸ Conviction for sin itself does not guarantee justification, but justification will not become a reality without it.

Justification is a legal term which describes a person's relationship to the law. Either a person is guilty or innocent. It comes from the Latin *justificatio* which expresses an internal change from inherently unrighteous to inherently righteous.⁹ It is accompanied by pardon and includes an official declaration of acceptance with God. It is to be reconciled to God by Jesus' death, having all

⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

⁸ Ibid., p. 65, 83.

⁹ Ibid., p. 110.

enmity removed as well as all causes of offense before God (Romans 5:9-10).¹⁰ Many have taught a memory aid to assist students in understanding justification. It is that justification is to be “just as if I have never sinned.” This formula is of limited usefulness because justification does more than return a person to a pristine state such as Adam’s original condition.

Owen explained that not only is the guilt of the believer imputed to Christ, and in turn Christ is treated as a guilty person even though He had no sin of His own, but also Christ’s perfect and proven righteousness is imputed to God’s own people who are in turn regarded legally as if having perfectly fulfilled all the requirements of the law (Isaiah 53:5,6; 2 Corinthians 5:21).¹¹ Thus the believer enters a new state as he is adopted by God and is given an inheritance. The imputation of guilt to Christ was temporary so that He might destroy and dispose of it. It did not alter His absolute state or condition. However, the righteousness of Christ was imputed permanently to the elect to effect an absolute change of state and condition which determines the believer’s relationship with God eternally.¹²

Far from promoting a system of faith-without-works salvation which opened the door to antinomianism, understanding the significance of Christ’s sacrifice and of His love for those for whom He died who could not help themselves, the normal response would be to burrow more deeply into the safety of Christ, desiring to put on all that He is. In one place Anselm is quoted as saying,

Dost thou believe that thou canst not be saved but by the death of Christ? The sick man answers, Yes; then let it be said unto him, Go to, then, and whilst thy soul abideth in thee, put all thy confidence in this death alone, place thy trust in no other thing; commit thyself wholly to this death, cover thyself wholly with this alone, cast thyself wholly on this death; wrap thyself wholly in this death.¹³

Owen makes clear that the imputation of the believer’s sin to Christ and Christ’s righteousness to the believer is solely God’s work. But he also says that the type of faith found in those who are justified must “exemplify [this double imputation] in our own souls, and really to perform what on our part is required unto their application unto us.”¹⁴ Instead of developing a lifestyle of attempting to establish her own righteousness, a believer instead learns to practice a habit of submission to the righteousness of God.¹⁵ In other words, one should begin producing works consistent with being a justified believer, not a guilty person alienated from God.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 120.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 30.

¹² Ibid., p. 184.

¹³ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

Faith, Owen explains, is the means of justification. But not all faith is of the quality that results in justification. For example, Simon the magician is said to have believed in Acts 8:13, yet Owen regards him as those in Jesus' parable of the seed who are represented by seed which springs up quickly but has no root and quickly dies (Luke 8:13).¹⁶ Likewise, those with counterfeit faith are those whom Jesus described as pleading on judgment day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your Name?" (Matthew 7:22-23). Such unbelief disapproves of the sacrifice of Christ while giving the appearance of approbation.¹⁷ Perhaps the person with false faith attempted to combine faith in Christ with their own attempts to keep the law or observe religious superstitions. True faith leads to renouncing all other means besides Christ of pursuing righteousness, life and salvation.¹⁸ Justifying faith includes the soul's approval and assent to the way of salvation God has made through the blood of Jesus, and it also personally appropriates the atonement and its benefits.¹⁹ It is pictured in the Bible as looking, coming to Christ for life and salvation, fleeing for refuge, going outside of oneself to find mercy, pardon, life, righteousness and salvation because of a realization that in his natural state one is "lost, hopeless, helpless, desolate, poor" and orphaned.²⁰

Faith is assenting to testimony. True faith is assenting to divine testimony. True faith is more than merely understanding. Owen taught that reason was suited to facilitate a relationship with God in man's pristine state in the Garden of Eden but became polluted by sin and therefore is incapable of choosing to embrace the Gospel.²¹ There must also be spiritual illumination produced by the Holy Spirit. Owen said, "True faith has that spiritual light in it, or accompanying of it, as that it is able to receive it, and to conduct the soul unto obedience by it."²² Justifying faith, then, originates from God's powerful grace (Ephesians 2:8) and is not naturally found within humans born in sin.²³ Owen said, The communication of this faith unto us is no less of grace than is the justification which we obtained thereby."²⁴

The Holy Spirit must change the will and take control of the affections. So those who profess faith but fail to live in holiness possess a dead faith which they share with devils.²⁵ Faith and obedience share the relationship of root and fruit. The obedience is contained in the faith.²⁶ He says that saving faith includes obedience "not as its form or essence but as the necessary effect is included in

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 266.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 268-269.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 39-40.

²² Ibid., p. 46.

²³ Ibid., p. 65.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 329.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

the cause, and the fruit in the fruit-bearing juice.”²⁷ Nevin, would be quick to highlight both as evidence of participating in the life of Christ.

Justifying faith will be characterized by repentance as a part of the struggle for obedience and against sin. As Michael Horton has said, faith is the means of justification, but it continues to function to facilitate perpetual renewal and service.²⁸ Owen quotes Mestrezat who defines such genuine faith as “the flight of the penitent sinner unto the mercy of God in Christ.”²⁹ Our author takes pains to make clear that no characteristic of justifying faith in any way earns merit for the believer.³⁰ And one must understand that justifying faith does not guarantee perfect behavior prior to entering heaven. It will demonstrate a “sincere purpose of heart to obey God in all things.”³¹ Since the law is not eliminated by Christ’s fulfillment of it, there is still sin after justification.³² It is the curse of the law which is removed. Since God’s people cannot initiate or accomplish their own justification, neither can they destroy it. It is God who both justifies and preserves believers in the state of justification.³³ Imputation of righteousness is not repeatable, and the pardon of actual sins committed after justification is possible because of the change in standing the believer enjoys before God because of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

Numerous clarifications are offered as to the precise nature of saving faith. While it is not mere intellectual assent or outward obedience, those elements must be present. Faith is an act of the will which is more than simply believing a person is forgiven. Jesus and His sacrifice are the object of true faith. Owen writes, “Faith is that act of the soul whereby convinced sinners, ready otherwise to perish, do look unto Christ as he was made a propitiation for their sins.”³⁴

Galatians 3:2 specifies that justification is not by works. Romans 3:28 declares it is by faith. Faith is the instrumental cause of justification.³⁵ Contrary to the expressions of modern faith healers, faith is a human duty and is not exercised by God. To speak of “the faith of God” as if it is faith that God exercises would indicate that faith itself has intrinsic powers which are external to God. Identifying faith as an instrument which God supplies aids in understanding that faith has no merit of its own. It gives believers the capacity to receive from God.³⁶ Owen said,

²⁷ Ibid., p. 108.

²⁸ Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 139.

²⁹ Owen, p. 66.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 69.

³¹ Ibid., p. 92.

³² Ibid., p. 131.

³³ Ibid., p. 132.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 98.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 100.

“That which we seek after in justification is a participation of the righteousness of God.³⁷ Righteousness is not granted as a reward for faith.³⁸

While the Biblical doctrine of justification includes a declaration of being made righteous, it does not infuse righteousness as a substance or essence or a habit of righteousness or a habit of grace³⁹ any more than a declaration of condemnation infuses wickedness or a habit of wickedness into the person being condemned.⁴⁰ Owen said that “Satisfaction and merit are adjuncts of the righteousness of Christ, as formally inherent in his own person; and as such it cannot be transfused into another.”⁴¹ The sins of God’s people being imputed to Christ did not mean that they were infused into Him so that He actually became a sinner.⁴² The personal sin inherent in one person never will become the personal sin of another. Adam passed on to all people both a depraved and corrupted nature and the guilt of his actual sin, but his personal sin was never actually our sin.⁴³

The Roman church taught the possibility of the infusion of a habit of charity that could finally justify a person before God. This led to the belief in a two-part justification which Owen refutes in chapter 5.⁴⁴ He held that there is a justification by law available if the person lives out perfect obedience without a single exception (Romans 2:13; 10:5; Matthew 19:16-19), as well as justification by faith through grace. However, no one can accomplish their own justification by the law (Galatians 5:19), and the two ways are mutually exclusive.⁴⁵ The Roman church with their teaching that the first justification is an infusion of righteousness by which a person may be justified through the resulting good works (a second justification) combines the two forms of justification which is an impossibility.⁴⁶ The Bible presents justification as a single unit, at once full and complete, not unfolding or developing in stages. The Roman church’s view downplays the true merit and significance of Christ’s sacrifice, holding that it merely laid the foundation so that believers may then go on to merit eternal life by their works. Thus human works could complete and perfect the merit of Christ.⁴⁷ Ephesians 1:7 says that in Christ’s sacrifice there is redemption and forgiveness. Just as Adam’s sin brought condemnation to all who are descended from him, so Christ constitutes as righteous all who are descended from Him (Romans 5:19). There is nothing progressive about justification in Scripture.⁴⁸ The removal of sins past,

³⁷ Ibid., p. 106.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 111.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 120.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 202.

⁴² Ibid., p. 178, 179.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 183.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 123.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 311.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 125.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 126.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 129.

present and future was a one-time event (Isaiah 53:5-6; Hebrews 1:3). Owen makes an analogy to those who are acquitted in a court of law. Their acquittal is not a gradual or progressive declaration based on their constantly improving behavior.⁴⁹

In Biblical justification there is a very real imputation of righteousness legally speaking, which defines a person's relation to the law (e.g., 2 Samuel 15:4; Deuteronomy 25:1). Proverbs 17:15 says, "He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, Both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord." Righteousness must be first imputed so that justification can take place. In Exodus 23:7 God said that He would not justify the wicked. In other words, God would not pass a favorable sentence on the wicked and pretend that they are just.⁵⁰ The righteous Servant of Isaiah 53:11 could justify many only on the grounds that their iniquities have been imputed to Him, and He has atoned for them.

The doctrine of sanctification is that which describes the nature of those justified. The believer's heart is renovated by God's gracious working as He washes, purifies and endows His people with obedience. Owen taught that justification must precede the inherent righteousness of sanctification.⁵¹ He points out that it is an error of the Roman church to confuse justification and sanctification, assuming that justification involves the renovation of human nature.⁵² Living rightly is the unfolding of the benefits of being found to have a new standing before God.⁵³ One of three ways that personal righteousness can be called justification is that it acts as evidence which testifies to our own consciences that we do truly partake of the grace of God in Jesus.⁵⁴ Another is when someone speaks of being justified before another person which means that his righteous character is demonstrated before others.⁵⁵ And the last is when personal righteousness serves to justify a person in the face of Satan's accusations. But personal righteousness can never justify in God's sight. True faith will be proven on judgment day by evidence of works. However, those works will not be the grounds for admission into the eternal inheritance.

In Chapter 7 the topic of imputation is examined. The account of Abraham gives the first specific reference to justification (Genesis 15:6). Abraham believed God and the promises He had made, and it was credited to the patriarch as righteousness. To impute something to a person may be a mere recognition of what a person already is or possesses (e.g., Ezekiel 18:20 and 2 Samuel 19:19). To impute to a person something he did not previously possess means that a

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 130.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 113.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 210.

⁵² Ibid., p. 116.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 135.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 139.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 140.

real donation has been made to the person. In other words, a person must truly be given righteousness before He can be credited as having it.⁵⁶ God will not impute to us imperfect righteousness. Our faith and obedience are imperfect. Therefore our faith and works are not a fit source from which to be credited as righteous.⁵⁷ Imputation is an act of justice and not of grace because it recognizes real righteousness present as a donation from Christ. Imputation expresses God's will to deal with us according to the righteousness we have received. God cannot and will not set aside the law and its demands in order to justify sinners.⁵⁸

What is done by one person may be imputed to another if the two are in union by means of a shared covenant relationship. The sin of Adam was imputed to all people because Adam served as our head who represented us in our covenant relations with God. Our depraved nature is imputed to us because we truly possess it. We are counted as having his guilt.⁵⁹ Under certain circumstances it is possible to have another's penalty imputed to you voluntary, such as Paul was willing to assume the debt of Onesimus (Philemon) and Judah took responsibility for Benjamin's wellbeing in Genesis 43:9.⁶⁰ In similar fashion, Christ voluntarily became sponsor for the elect and assumed responsibility for their sins. In exchange, righteousness of which believers were not the author or performer or source, has been imputed to them.⁶¹ The righteousness which is imputed to believers is both the righteousness of Christ's complete obedience and that of His sufferings as well.⁶² Under Owen's direction the Savoy Declaration of 1658 expanded on some wording of the Westminster Confession of Faith to address debates that were current in that day on the topic of justification. One clarification offered is that both Christ's active and passive righteousness are imputed to the believer.⁶³

Some have made objection to this teaching by saying that Christ's obedience to the law was for Himself and so could not have been for others.⁶⁴ The key, however, to understanding Owen's perspective is the covenant. Christ did not

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 151.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 152.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 217.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 153.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 154.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 155.

⁶² Ibid., p. 157.

⁶³ Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007, rpt. 2011), p. 107. On page 108 is found a quote from the Savoy Declaration (XI.i) as follows: "Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous, nor for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing Faith itself, the act of believing, or any other Evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness, but by imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole Law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by Faith, which Faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God."

⁶⁴ Owen, p. 230.

come to earth as an ordinary individual but as mediator of the covenant of grace. He further develops his argument by explaining that Christ's human nature was subject to the law, but His divine nature was not. So the divine Son of God, including His human nature which He took to Himself, was not subject to the law. This means that the obedience He rendered was not for Himself but for others.⁶⁵ He who is over the law is not bound to obey it.⁶⁶ From the moment of the inception of the hypostatic union, Christ's humanity was worthy of all glory and honor. But the Father ordained that glory would come through His suffering for us.⁶⁷ Yet Owen says that every human being is obligated to keep the law of creation, including the human nature of Jesus. He said, "Every rational creature is eternally obliged from the nature of God, and its relation thereunto, to love him, obey him, depend upon him, submit unto him, and to make him its end, blessedness and reward."⁶⁸ Christ perfectly fulfilled this obligation in behalf of His people. While Christ's obedience involved suffering, this does not mean that suffering itself is righteousness.⁶⁹

As the sinner and Adam are connected in a covenantal relationship, the believer's hope of salvation rests on Jesus and the church being united as one mystical person in a covenant relationship. Jesus is the Head of the body, and all believers are members.⁷⁰ A mystical union differs from a natural, legal or political relationship. Because of this relationship believers can rightly claim to have been crucified in Christ.⁷¹ He has become surety for the church according to this covenant relationship, the guarantor of the debts of believers.⁷² For the believer, this translates into the sweet comfort that God is for us and no longer against us. Jesus assumed our humanity to become surety for us and to accomplish atonement in our behalf. Just as Judah respected his father Jacob's concern for Benjamin's safety and wellbeing, so Christ has pledged Himself to protect the glory of God and secondly the safety and wellbeing of believers.⁷³

Someone who is surety for another must have more ability, credit or reputation than those whom he represents or it would be pointless for him to offer himself in that capacity. As the divine-human high priest, Jesus fulfills the demands of one who would be surety for us and guarantee our salvation.⁷⁴ Jesus undergoing the punishment due to His people guaranteed for them safety and blessing.⁷⁵ His shed blood made the covenant of grace and glory irrevocable.⁷⁶ His death was

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 233.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 234.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 236.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 237.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 249.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 160.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 162.

⁷² Ibid., p. 166.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 167.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 168-169.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 171.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 175-176.

not to establish the covenant but to secure for believers the benefits and blessings of the covenant previously established between the Father and the Son before the world was created.⁷⁷ He became the “principal, efficient cause” of the believer’s righteousness.⁷⁸

Owen held to three covenants to which the Scriptures alluded. In his exposition on Hebrews he defined 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.”⁷⁹ He taught that the function of a covenant in this context is to bring people into union with Christ, and then to cause them to share in His blessings.⁸⁰ The first covenant Owen noted was the covenant of redemption which was an inter-Trinitarian agreement which established Christ’s mediation on behalf of the elect. Thus Christ became surety for His people, committing Himself to pay for what He never took and did not owe.⁸¹ The Bible describes this by saying that God laid all our iniquities on Him and that He made Him to be sin for us even though He knew no sin of His own. God gave the law power over Him to inflict punishment for the sins of those for whom He assumed responsibility as surety. Election, wrote Thomas Goodwin, is God choosing believers to include in a “supernatural union with himself, and communication of himself.”⁸²

Next, the covenant of works (or the law of creation) was a covenant that existed between God and Adam. There was no mediator in this covenant, but God and Adam dealt directly with each other. There was no provision in the terms of the covenant for pardoning sin or covering any defects.⁸³ Adam was created as an intelligent and rational being, capable of moral obedience and of responding to promises of rewards or threats of punishments. He was made capable of being governed by law which enters his soul through its rational faculties.⁸⁴ Owen believed that the Mosaic law was not a part of the covenant of grace which was founded on promise, but was a republication of the conditions of the covenant of works, given to convince humanity of their inability to keep the covenant of works, to acknowledge their depravity and to lead them to trust God’s gracious promises.⁸⁵ All covenants that could be summed up by “do this and live” are an extension or extrapolation of this original covenant.⁸⁶ He believed that the law of

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 176.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 314.

⁷⁹ Michael Brown, “The Covenant of Works Revived: John Owen on Republication in the Mosaic Covenant” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 4 (2008): p. 153.

⁸⁰ Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), p. 505.

⁸¹ Brown, p. 154.

⁸² Beeke, p. 158.

⁸³ Brown, p. 155.

⁸⁴ Owen, p. 218.

⁸⁵ Brown, p. 158

⁸⁶ Owen, p. 250

the covenant of works is in force forever.⁸⁷ The benefits of this covenant are no longer available, because sin excluded all people from them. Owen summarized this law thus,

The substance of this law was, that man, adhering unto God absolutely, universally, unchangeably, uninterruptedly, in trust, love, and fear, as the chiefest good, the first author of his being, of all the present and future advantages whereof it is capable, should yield obedience unto him, with respect unto his infinite wisdom, righteousness, and almighty power to protect, reward, and punish, in all things known to be his will and pleasure, either by the light of his own mind or especial revelation made unto him.⁸⁸

The original purpose of the law was that men and women should be righteous before God. Its present function of bringing conviction or judgment is “accidental unto its primitive constitution.”⁸⁹ Death was the sure penalty for violators of that law. A violation was a failure to recognize God as God and man as man who was created to honor God as perfect.

The covenant of grace included provision for surety and a mediator who performs for the elect what Adam failed to do in the covenant of works, keeping the entire law.⁹⁰ Anything less than the imputation of Christ’s active and passive obedience would fail to free the elect from condemnation.⁹¹ Again, Owen believed that the establishment of this new covenant did not cause the precepts of the covenant of works to become obsolete.⁹² The law is a representation of God’s holiness, and neither He nor His holiness change, so the law does not cease to exist either. The question may arise how repentance and faith may be required of those who partake of the covenant of grace since it is not a covenant requiring the fulfillment of works on the part of those who participate. Again, it must be remembered that faith is the instrument of receiving Christ. Herman Bavinck later would express that while the covenant of grace is unconditional in its essence, it does execute conditions in its administration. And he reassured the reader that God supplies what He demands. Christ has accomplished all that is required, and the Holy Spirit applies it to the elect.⁹³ Thus the responsibilities of covenant participants should not be considered conditions for inheriting eternal life but as characteristics of the life already received.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 221.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 219.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 313.

⁹⁰ Brown, p. 156. Also, Owen, p. 251.

⁹¹ Brown, p. 161.

⁹² Owen, pp. 226-227.

⁹³ Horton, p. 149.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 150.

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