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*The Claims of Truth*

Carl R. Trueman

# The Claims of Truth

John Owen's Trinitarian Theology

Carl R. Trueman



**Reformation Heritage Books**  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

*The Claims of Truth*

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For Catriona  
*Sine qua non.*



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## Preface 2021

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When Reformation Heritage proposed republishing *The Claims of Truth*, I was both delighted and a little nervous. The idea of revisiting a book nearly twenty-five years after writing, and from such an early point in my academic career, was bound to be a strange experience. Yet, as strange as it was, it was not ultimately an uncomfortable one. Indeed, as I looked again at *The Claims of Truth*, there were moments when I was pleasantly surprised at how much I knew—and have subsequently forgotten—about John Owen. The stories we academics tend to tell ourselves—about how we have grown in knowledge over the years—are not entirely accurate. I also winced at some of the obvious signs of immaturity of style, particularly the rather too obvious pleasure I took in critiquing those with whom I disagreed. Taking these two realities into account, were I to write the book today, I suspect it would therefore be both less learned in content but more gentlemanly in tone.

Yet perhaps the most striking thing about the book is how it is evidence of the changes the world of scholarship on Reformed Orthodoxy has witnessed in the years since its publication. It was originally published by Paternoster but only after a prestigious university press had refused the proposal, not on the grounds of the questionable ability of the author (a rationale I could have understood) but on the grounds that, and I quote, “John Owen was a second-rate figure of little historical or theological interest.”

It is hard to imagine anyone making such a claim today, because Owen has gone from being a figure of interest only to those involved in the recovery of Puritan theology for the service of contemporary piety to a major focus of scholarly interest in the development of Reformed Orthodoxy in the seventeenth century. Since my book was published, he has been the subject of numerous doctoral dissertations, a major scholarly biography, and several scholarly monographs; he has been the subject of academic conferences; and he has been a mainstay of the broader narrative of the rise and fall of Reformed Scholasticism in Europe in the two centuries after the Reformation. Owen is no longer on the margins. He has received his rightful due as one of the most significant Reformed theologians of the seventeenth century.

I believe that *The Claims of Truth* played a key part in all this. Indeed, my book did several things that moved the discussion of Owen in a direction that led to this growth of interest in him and his thought and ensured that such casual dismissal of him would now seem absurd to anyone who knows the subject. My book set him in historical context, avoiding the temptation to read his thought in terms set mainly by later theological debates and politics, most obviously reflected in the “Calvin against the Calvinists” idea that gripped some imaginations from the 1960s to the 1990s. It placed him in a European context, reading his theology against the background of the theology and philosophy—ancient and contemporary, English and Continental—that he himself was reading and with which he was engaged in dialogue. And it sought to set one doctrine—that of the atonement—in the context of the wider doctrinal matrix in which it should be understood. In short, it was the first attempt to treat Owen in the manner of true intellectual history, respecting his context and allowing that context, not my personal theological predilections, to drive the analysis.

In all this, of course, I was merely applying the approach that my friend and mentor, Richard Muller, was pioneering for the study of Reformed Orthodoxy as a whole. He began the revolution and proved to be its most brilliant exemplar and inspirational scholar. I was merely one of the earliest who followed his lead and tested his method and theses on a seventeenth-century Puritan. Many others have followed, and, twenty-five years on, perhaps one more surprising observation is

that we who were the rebels in the 1990s are now the pillars of the establishment today. Was there ever a revolution in historiography so swift and so decisive as that led by the likes of Richard Muller and the late Willem Van Asselt, a dear and sadly missed friend, against the “Calvin versus the Calvinists” consensus? Today the latter has, as far as I can see, completely fled the field.

Yet *The Claims of Truth* has its flaws. I have already mentioned the rather too gleeful way I engaged in polemic. At a more serious level, the treatment of Richard Baxter, like Owen another Puritan who has come in from the scholarly cold in the last twenty-five years, lacks nuance. My claim that he was influenced by Tommaso Campanella is too strong; the metaphysical distinctions I traced to that source are too generic to allow for such an unequivocal assertion. And it may well be that I overstated the case for seeing Thomas Goodwin as holding to eternal justification.

There are also absences I would rectify today. The influence of Owen’s tutor, Thomas Barlow, remains something that needs exploring. I spent little time on Owen’s exegesis of Hebrews, a notable absence in a book that culminates in a discussion of the atonement. And I left unexplored the implications of Owen’s theology for his piety. Yet in saying these things, I find myself playing a version of a theme common to book reviewers: this is not the book I would have written. I would not, however, put it quite that strongly. Perhaps better: this is not quite, not quite, the book I would have written today. But in large part that is because of the scholarly discoveries others have made—and probably would not have made had I not placed Owen on the scholarly agenda.

For all the flaws, however, I believe the book has stood the test of time. It may not represent the state of art in studies of Owen or Reformed Orthodoxy, but I believe its central findings remain sound. It is not simply a museum piece but does offer some insight into the world of the seventeenth-century Reformed mind. As a result, I am delighted that Reformation Heritage is making it available to a new generation of students of Owen—available, that is, “warts and all” as Owen’s erstwhile friend Oliver Cromwell said.

—Carl R. Trueman  
Grove City College  
January 2021



## Preface to the First Edition

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A few brief comments are in order as a preliminary to the main text. First, while this book will no doubt be understood in some quarters as a defense of Owen's theology, such an interpretation would, in fact, represent a misreading of my argument. I wish at the start to make it clear that I write as a historian of ideas, not as a systematic theologian. My interest is not to discover whether Owen was right or wrong but to see what he said, why he said it, whether it was coherent by the standards of his day, and how he fits into the theological context of his own times and of the Western tradition as a whole. Of course, I do have personal intellectual convictions about the theological value of Owen's writings, but I have tried to be aware of my own theological commitments and to keep them as separate as humanly possible from my analysis. Several of my Nottingham colleagues, unconvinced by my protestations of objectivity, have pushed me on this point on a number of occasions, and I have had to confess to them that the "truth question" often haunts me like Banquo's ghost at Macbeth's feast. If my powers of exorcism have let me down at any point in the following pages, I ask the reader's indulgence.

Following from the first point, I have used terminology in this book that normally has certain dogmatic and evaluative connotations but which I have employed in a way that is not meant to imply either endorsement or criticism of certain ideas. For example, I have used the word *heresy* and its cognates not to cast aspersions on particular positions but to reflect the fact that certain ideas stood outside of the

creedal and confessional traditions of mainstream Western Christendom. I have also used *orthodoxy* with a small case *o* to refer to ideas that are historically consistent with the Western catholic tradition devolving from the early church creeds, and *Orthodoxy* with a capital *O* to refer to ideas consistent with the historic confessional tradition of the Reformed churches. One reviewer of my earlier book, *Luther's Legacy*, objected in a rather bad-tempered fashion to my use of the term *Catholic Church* when referring to the church that looks to the pope as its authority. I still prefer this title to the anachronistic Protestant phrase *Roman Catholic Church* and have used it again in this book, although occasionally I have had recourse to the inelegant word *papist*. Again, this is not intended as a pejorative term.

The most delightful part of writing a book is thanking those who have helped to make the project possible. First, thanks are due to Pieter Kwant and the staff at Paternoster Publishing for giving advanced support to the project and seeing it through the press. I also owe, once again, a great debt to my friend Peter Stephens, professor of church history at the University of Aberdeen. It was Peter who first taught me the importance of not using my own theological convictions as criteria for historical analysis and who, through many telephone calls and letters, has over the years been a source of constant encouragement and advice. He will note, with some amusement, I hope, rather than disappointment, that the pupil is in this book rebelling against the teacher on various points of style and presentation; but it remains true that all I learned about the methodological content of church history, I have learned from him. Scott Clark, of Wheaton College, has been similarly supportive and has offered constructive criticism on a number of sections of the work. Thanks too to Paul Schaefer Jr. for giving me a copy of his excellent Oxford DPhil thesis.

At Nottingham Tony Thiselton and Douglas Davies, as heads of department, both gave help and support at various times, and Ed Ball provided an absolutely invaluable taxi service to the Cambridge University Library. Seth Kunin, my colleague in the "Aristotelian Annex" of the Nottingham Department, has helped to keep me sane with his dry, rabbinic wit and with regular pints of real ale. My postgraduate, Steve Griffiths, deserves mention as the one human being in Britain to whom I can talk about Owen without his eyes glazing over within thirty

seconds. John Heywood Thomas has also been a key influence. It was he who first alerted me to the central importance of medieval philosophy for subsequent theology and who gave up valuable time to talk to me about Aquinas and to comment on some of my theories about Owen.

In addition to my Nottingham colleagues, I have been fortunate enough to spend over six months at the Meeter Center, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, where most of the writing of this project was carried out. The staff there was wonderful, providing me with a home and an office, allowing me full use of both the library and the inter-library loan system, and even paying for certain rare materials to be microfilmed. I am particularly grateful to Connie Bellows, director of human resources at Calvin College, for being such a great landlady; to the director of the Meeter Center, Rick Gamble; to the Center's librarian, Paul Fields; and to the secretary, Susan Schmurr, for all their help and for countless acts of personal kindness toward myself and my family. In addition to the Meeter Center, another attraction of the Calvin College campus was the dynamic presence of Richard Muller. My intellectual debt to his work is immense, and the time I spent with him and his postgraduate student, Raymond Blacketer, was both stimulating and entertaining.

Research, of course, costs money. I would like to thank the following for their help: the University of Nottingham for granting me a semester of study leave in 1996 and for the award of a New Lecturer's Research Grant to facilitate work on Thomas Aquinas and on Reformed theology; Mary Charles Murray, my colleague, and Terence Wilkerson, reader in philosophy at Nottingham, for providing crucial references; the British Academy for the Small Personal Research Grant, which enabled me to stay at the Meeter Center; and the Governing Body of the Meeter Center for the award of a stipendiary fellowship for 1996.

I would also like to thank Dr. Alan Clifford for his work on Owen and for the numerous conversations we have had over the years. When I read his book five years ago I realized that sooner or later we would have to cross swords in print. The following book contains much sharp dissent from his work, but I hope he will understand it as an attempt to criticize his views that yet takes them seriously.

Finally, I would like to thank the many people from outside the academic world who made my study leave possible: my parents for

administering my finances and so on in my absence; Arthur Johnson for constant, if sometimes slightly bemused, support and encouragement; Neil and Bethan Parmenter for friendship and for help with moving to the States; John and Pauline Horry, good friends, the latter of whom put some real “va-va-voom” into our American trip; the Barham family for help with the logistics of our return; my two sons, John and Peter, for helping me to keep my work in perspective; and my wife, Catriona, who for the last three years has listened to my sometimes very angry outbursts about Owen, the secondary scholarship, and my own work. She was also willing to leave home and friends and travel to the other side of the world just so that I could pursue the project. The book is dedicated to her in thanks for all that she has given up, materially and emotionally, over the years so that I could pursue my goals.

—Carl R. Trueman  
Nottingham



## Abbreviations

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<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>BSABR</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra and American Biblical Repository</i>
<i>CD</i>	<i>Barth, Church Dogmatics</i>
<i>CH</i>	<i>Church History</i>
<i>CO</i>	<i>Opera Calvini</i>
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>DLGTT</i>	<i>Muller, Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms</i>
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JHI</i>	<i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>
<i>JMRS</i>	<i>Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies</i>
<i>NAKG</i>	<i>Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis</i>
<i>NCE</i>	<i>New Catholic Encyclopedia</i>
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>PRRD1</i>	<i>Muller, Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics 1</i>
<i>PRRD2</i>	<i>Muller, Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics 2</i>
<i>RC</i>	<i>Racovian Catechism</i>
<i>SCJ</i>	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Aquinas, Summa Theologiae</i>
<i>WCF</i>	<i>Westminster Confession of Faith</i>
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>



## CHAPTER 1

# Owen in Context

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John Owen is, in many ways, the forgotten man of English theology. In his own day he was chaplain to Cromwell, preacher to Parliament, chancellor of Oxford University, leading light of the Independents, and the preeminent Puritan theologian—by any standard one of the most influential men of his generation. He was also immensely learned: even a cursory reading of Owen’s works reveals a mind steeped in patristic, medieval, and Reformation theology and phenomenally well-versed in contemporary theological literature—Protestant, Catholic, and heretical. Yet the scholarly interest in his work since his own day has been minuscule, even compared to that in his contemporary, Richard Baxter.<sup>1</sup>

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1. There is an excellent modern biography of Owen: P. Toon, *God’s Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster, 1971). Also worth consulting is A. Thomson’s “Life of Dr Owen,” in *The Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850–1855), 1:xxi–cxxii (hereafter cited as *Works*). Even work on Baxter has been slight until fairly recently. A good discussion of the progress made in Baxter studies can be found in Hans Boersma’s fascinating analysis of Baxter, *A Hot Pepper Corn: Richard Baxter’s Doctrine of Justification in Its Seventeenth-Century Context of Controversy* (Zoetermeer, Netherlands: Boekencentrum, 1993), 1–24. While I disagree with Boersma’s reading of Owen, this book is the most significant contribution to the study of Baxter’s theology since J. I. Packer’s (sadly) unpublished DPhil thesis, “The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter” (Oxford University, 1954). Other more recent works on Baxter’s life and cultural contribution include G. F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter* (London: Nelson, 1965); and N. H. Keeble, *Richard Baxter: Puritan Man of Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

A number of reasons for this neglect immediately suggest themselves—none of which have anything to do with the intrinsic merit of Owen's work as an example of seventeenth-century English theology or Reformed Orthodoxy. The first is the fact that theology within English universities has been, until fairly recently, the monopoly of an established church for whom Reformed theology was simply not a major interest. The Great Ejection of 1662 effectively removed from the church, and thus from the intellectual establishment, the vast majority of those ministers committed to a more thoroughly Reformed faith; it therefore surrendered both the church and, as a result, the academy to a group whose theological concerns were generally more latitudinarian. In the twentieth century the Anglican monopoly of higher education has gone, but Anglicans have continued to set much of the scholarly agenda within university theology departments and so have also determined that the subjects studied reflect their own ecclesiastical concerns. Consequently, the Puritans, and Owen among them, suffered the neglect that their separation from the church made inevitable.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to this ecclesiastical dimension, the scholarly neglect of Owen is affected also by the nature of the Anglo-American interest in Puritanism. This interest has tended to emphasize the social, political, and, more recently, psychological aspects of Puritanism rather than its theological dimensions, as is clearly seen in the works of, among others, Perry Miller, Christopher Hill, and Patrick Collinson.<sup>3</sup> Such scholars

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2. The work of Packer is a notable exception to this Anglican trend, but the majority of his contributions since his dissertation have been aimed exclusively at ecclesiastical, not scholarly, constituencies: see, for example, the collection of essays titled *Among God's Giants: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Eastbourne, U.K.: Kingsway, 1991).

3. See P. Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939); C. Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England* (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1967); P. Collinson *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). For articles surveying the way in which Puritan studies, particularly those concerned with New England, have changed over recent decades, see the following: M. McGiffert, "American Puritan Studies in the 1960's," *William and Mary Quarterly*, Series 3, 27 (1970): 36–67; L. B. Ricard, "New England Puritan Studies in the 1970s," *Fides et Historia* 15 (1983): 6–27. For an assessment of Perry Miller's contribution to Puritan studies, and a critique of his underplaying of the role of the Bible and theology in Puritanism, see George M.

have done much magisterial work and greatly expanded our knowledge of the Puritan tradition, but they have inevitably tended to focus on aspects other than the theological. The strength of the nontheological tendency within Puritan studies is evident from the fact that most of those engaged in studying British and American Puritanism do not do so from within university theology or religion departments but under the auspices of other disciplines: Miller, for example, was a literature professor; Hill and Collinson are historians.

While the gains made by such nontheological studies of Puritanism have been immense, the lack of interest in the theological dimension has created a situation where seventeenth-century studies compare somewhat unfavorably with the related discipline of sixteenth-century studies. In the latter field, the last thirty years have seen an immense amount of work that has sought to understand Reformation thought against the background of medieval and Renaissance patterns and that has also attempted to synthesize the intellectual dimensions of the age with underlying social and political concerns.<sup>4</sup> The result has not been a simple reworking of the old-style history of ideas, but an increasingly rich and diversified crop of works that has greatly illuminated our understanding of the age. Indeed, through the early work of Heiko Oberman, and the studies of exegesis that have emerged from his pupil David Steinmetz and his students at Duke University, there has occurred a revolutionary change in the way in which the theology of the Reformation is viewed.<sup>5</sup> No longer can the subject be studied in terms of a straightforward reaction to the Middle Ages: the

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Marsden, "Perry Miller's Rehabilitation of the Puritans," *CH* 39 (1970): 91–105. Also worth consulting in this context is the bibliographical essay in Charles L. Cohen's *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 275–89.

4. The work of Heiko Oberman has been particularly significant in this context: see his *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth, 1983); and *The Masters of the Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

5. See Heiko Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986); D. C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1980); and S. E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

relationship between Reformation thought and its precursors has been shown to be highly complex and to defy classification in the simplistic partisan terms advocated by earlier generations of scholars, both Catholic and Protestant. This development in scholarship, exciting though it is, finds few counterparts in the field of the seventeenth century, partly because there is no tradition of intellectual history with regard to Puritanism corresponding to that on which Oberman and others were able to build, and partly because those studying Puritanism have neither the interest nor the theological training to pursue such a course. This is not to denigrate what has been done—far from it—but simply to explain why there is such a dearth of studies on seventeenth-century theology and to point out that, just as social and political studies can no longer claim to be exhaustive in scope with reference to Reformation history, so they should not claim the same with reference to the seventeenth century.

Given the above, it is not surprising that Owen features in the narrative of scholarship on Puritanism only occasionally, a fact that belies his significance, intellectually as well as politically, in his own day. Owen has not been singled out for such neglect: as yet, there are scarcely any published monographs on any leading Puritan thinker, and many of the studies that do deal with Puritan theology tend, in the tradition of Miller, to focus on sermonic material as their basic source; but it is simply not an adequate approach to focus all the attention on sermons as the basis for understanding the Puritan mind. The sermon is where the Puritan mind touched the Puritan pew and thus where theology and society came, as it were, into contact, but the content of those sermons was determined to a large extent by the large theological tomes and works of exegesis that lined the walls of Puritan studies: of these works, many of which would have been written by Owen, scholars have said almost nothing.<sup>6</sup> Until extensive work has been done on

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6. In his fascinating account of New England preaching, Harry S. Stout describes as the most surprising result of his research his discovery that the content of sermons remained remarkably stable during the period he studied. See *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6. This may indeed be surprising from the perspective of a historian interested in the changing social function of sermons but is easily explicable from a theological perspective, where the continuity in theological framework can be seen as

the theological convictions of the Puritans in a manner that parallels the work on the Lutheranism and Reformed theology of the sixteenth century, the kind of work scholars such as Oberman have pioneered with reference to the sixteenth century will simply not be possible with reference to the seventeenth.

While Owen has been all but forgotten by scholars, his name is, however, very much alive within certain Christian circles, and this too has not helped to bring him to academic attention. His works are indeed highly thought of today by some, but these supporters are generally very conservative, even fundamentalist, Christian groups who are interested in Owen not because they wish to understand him within his historical context but because his writings are seen as an important source for their own brand of conservative theology and as normative for today. This pietistic tradition is most clearly symbolized by the fact that his works are kept in print by the Banner of Truth Trust, a group that has done tremendous work in keeping Puritan writings available but is also committed to a particular doctrinal position that renders any book which it publishes suspect, often unfairly, to many in the academic community. As a result, Owen is perhaps regarded by others (if they have heard of him) less as a seventeenth-century thinker and more as an obscurantist precursor of some fearful brand of fundamentalism.<sup>7</sup> Such a picture is reinforced when one of the few pieces of significant scholarship on Owen to emerge in recent years is, in its stated purpose, an exposé of the errors in his theology and thus a contribution more to contemporary debates within the British neo-Calvinist movement than to seventeenth-century studies.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, while there has been a steady growth in interest in

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playing a significant role. Of course, in order to show this, one must study the theological systems and commentaries that lie behind the sermons, and not simply the sermons themselves, and there has been little work in this area.

7. Even given the partisan approach of this tradition, it has nevertheless produced a number of articles that, through their uncritically descriptive approach to Owen's thought, actually produce more historically accurate portraits than some of the more tendentious scholarly readings. See, for example, Jack N. MacLeod, "John Owen and the Death of Death," in *Out of Bondage*, Proceedings of the Westminster Conference (Nottingham, 1984).

8. A. C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640–1790, an Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), esp. vii–ix.

seventeenth-century Reformed theology over recent years,<sup>9</sup> two further factors have continued to marginalize Owen. First there has been the tendency in Continental theological scholarship to exclude, whether by intent or accident, Puritanism from its discussions. Indeed, when looking at books on the seventeenth century, one could be forgiven for thinking that Orthodoxy and Puritanism are discrete phenomena. The paucity of British authors cited in Heppe's famous collection symbolizes this separation from the side of Orthodoxy,<sup>10</sup> while, on the Puritan side, the tradition of scholarship that takes its cue from M. M. Knappen has tended to assume that the origins and development of Puritanism lie in England's medieval reform movements and that it is therefore an essentially English phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> Only in the work of Richard Muller is some real attempt to overcome this problem.<sup>12</sup>

The second tendency has been the willingness of those few scholars

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9. There are a number of fine studies of Puritan theology in existence, but on the whole these tend to study the Puritans in terms of their contemporary context and of the Reformed tradition, ignoring the impact of patristic and medieval sources on their thinking. See J. S. Coolidge, *The Pauline Renaissance in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); G. F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); J. von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); and D. D. Wallace, *Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

10. H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978). For other classic studies of Reformed Orthodoxy that take little or no account of Anglo-Saxon developments, see P. Althaus, *Die Prinzipien der deutschen reformierten Dogmatik im Zeitalter der aristotelischen Scholastik* (Leipzig: Deichertsche, 1914); E. Bizer, *Frühorthodoxie und Rationalismus* (Zurich: EVZ, 1963); and H. E. Weber, *Reformation, Orthodoxie, und Rationalismus* (Gutersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann, 1951).

11. See M. M. Knappen's *Tudor Puritanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939); and *Two Elizabethan Puritan Diaries* (Gloucester, U.K.: Peter Smith, 1966), 1. His lead is followed, for example, by E. F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (Ligonier, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), 42. More recently, Patrick Collinson has attacked the insularity of Puritan studies by pointing to the interaction, both economic and intellectual, between English Puritanism and parallel Reformed movements on the Continent. See his "The Beginnings of English Sabbatarianism," in *Godly People: Essays on English Protestantism and Puritanism* (London: Hambledon, 1982), 429n13; and his "England and International Calvinism, 1558–1640," in *International Calvinism*, ed. M. Prestwich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 197–223.

12. See, for example, Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth, 1986).



who are interested in Puritan theology to accept the “Calvin against the Calvinists” thesis.<sup>13</sup> In such a world, Owen, as one of those terrible scholastic perverters of Calvin’s own thought, is demonized and doomed to have importance only in relation to sixteenth-century antecedents.<sup>14</sup> Such scholars need only look at Owen to find proof texts that confirm their a priori analytical model and they consider their task completed. Indeed, Owen almost seems in some works to fulfill a role analogous to one of the poor wretches in Hilaire Belloc’s *Cautionary Verses*, a salutary lesson to any tempted to feel that Calvin’s thought was not the last word in Christian theology.<sup>15</sup> This tradition, dominated to a large extent by scholars with personal theological agendas and a vested interest in driving a wedge between Calvin and the Reformed Orthodox, has tended to bypass the work of Oberman et al. and to pursue an agenda that probably confirms the deepest suspicions of most social historians about the presuppositions, purpose, and value of intellectual history.<sup>16</sup>

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13. This thesis finds its most concise statement in B. Hall’s essay, “Calvin against the Calvinists,” in *John Calvin*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 19–37. Other such work includes R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1997); and H. Rolston III, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1972).

14. See, for example, Alan Clifford’s notion of “authentic Calvinism” in *Atonement and Justification*, 69–94.

15. Perhaps the scholar who most persistently portrays Owen in dark colors is James Torrance. For him, Owen has a doctrine of God that completely undermines assurance and makes God essentially justice and only arbitrarily love, and is the Puritan whose theology is most vitiated by the Western *ordo salutis*: see “The Concept of Federal Theology—Was Calvin a Federal Theologian?,” in *Calvinus sacrae Scripturae confessor*, ed. W. H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 15–40, 36; “The Incarnation and ‘Limited Atonement,’” *EQ* 55 (1982): 83–94, 84; and “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, ed. A. I. C. Heron (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1982), 40–54. What is most intriguing about Professor Torrance’s criticisms is the complete lack of specific primary source citation and discussion—two passing references in the above articles to the whole of *The Death of Death* scarcely count as documentary proof of particular charges.

16. The picture is not all black, however. On the positive side, Owen has proved a moderately popular subject for research dissertations among students interested in the Reformed theology of the seventeenth century, although few of these have ultimately found their way into print; perhaps this last fact is an indicator of the lack of wider scholarly interest in the intellectual life of seventeenth-century Puritanism. Nevertheless, the last decade has seen the publication of four books that did start life as dissertations and do pay significant attention to Owen and his thought: Sinclair

In light of the above, there is a clear need to study the thought of individuals such as Owen in order to shed light on the intellectual dynamics of the seventeenth century in a manner that avoids the unhistorical pitfalls represented both by those who attempt to isolate English Puritanism from the tradition of Continental Reformed Orthodoxy and by those who adopt the “Calvin against the Calvinists” model of interpretation. The approach taken toward Owen in this work is determined by the conviction that he was one of the most significant English Reformed theologians of the *seventeenth century* and that is how he must be interpreted. Therefore, the criteria used to explicate and evaluate his work will not be those of the sixteenth century, or even of the twentieth century—such approaches are nonsensical in terms of historical method and usually tell the reader more about the author’s own beliefs than about those of the subject.<sup>17</sup> Instead, Owen’s thought will be described and explained in terms of the various theological traditions of Christianity to which he belonged and on which he drew, and of the particular intellectual and polemical contexts within which he found himself working. The result may well be too descriptive for some, but, when one surveys the scholarship on Reformed Orthodoxy, it often seems that attempts to indulge in dogmatic evaluation of the relevant theology have led to an obscuring and distortion of the canons of historical method and objectivity. Those who wish to argue about whether Owen is right or wrong may do so, but that is not a game played within this book, and to read it in such a way is to mistake

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Ferguson’s *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987); Alan Clifford’s *Atonement and Justification*; Joel Beeke’s *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); and Randall Gleason’s *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995) (pp. 177–80 of this last work contain a very useful list of unpublished dissertations on Owen and related subjects). All four make significant contributions to the field, and, while Ferguson, Beeke, and Gleason take a generally positive view of Owen’s work, the somewhat negative assessment of Clifford raises a number of interesting questions for future students of the Puritan’s theology.

17. A good, if not slightly amusing, example of an unhistorical statement about seventeenth-century theology is that made by J. B. Torrance when he alleges that it is the “nature-grace” model of the Westminster Confession that prevents it from saying anything “about race relations.” See “Strengths and Weaknesses,” 50. To the historical mind, it is more likely to be the fact that race relations were not an issue in seventeenth-century England that is to blame for such an oversight.

my intention. The task in hand is one of explication and clarification. After all, even if one wishes ultimately to make the case that Owen was either a perverter or a preserver of the Reformed tradition, one must first establish exactly what he said and why he said it.

### The Importance of the Theological Context

The word *Puritan* has proved notoriously difficult to define, and it remains true to say that it is easier to give examples of Puritans than give a precise and fully adequate definition of *Puritanism*.<sup>18</sup> That Owen was a Puritan is beyond all doubt, but as a label for him it is somewhat limited in its usefulness. Indeed, because of its cultural and historical connotations, it places a perhaps undue emphasis on Owen's position as a seventeenth-century Anglo-Saxon that, while obviously true, is only part of the story. In order to understand Owen and his theology, it is vital to see him as part of an ongoing Western theological tradition that has historical roots back beyond the Reformation, beyond even the Middle Ages, and is closely allied to parallel movements on the Continent.

Recent scholarship on the sixteenth century, while not blind to important areas of discontinuity, has brought attention to the important continuities that exist between Reformation thought and the patristic and medieval intellectual background.<sup>19</sup> As noted above, this approach to the history of doctrine has been taken up and applied with

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18. The literature debating the definition of *Puritanism* is vast. The following represent a good sample of the variety of views on this subject: J. C. Brauer, "Reflections on the Nature of English Puritanism," *CH* 23 (1954): 99–108; Collinson, *Elizabethan Puritan Movement*; B. Hall, "Puritanism: The Problem of Definition," in *Studies in Church History*, ed. G. J. Cumming (London: Nelson, 1965), 2:283–96; W. Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Columbia, 1955); Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England*; Miller, *New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*; Jens Møller, "The Beginning of Puritan Covenant Theology," *JEH* 14 (1963): 46–67; L. J. Trinterud, "The Origins of Puritanism," *CH* 20 (1951): 37–57. For a good recent discussion of the issues, see Paul R. Schaefer Jr., "The Spiritual Brotherhood on the Habits of the Heart: Cambridge Protestants and the Doctrine of Sanctification from William Perkins to Thomas Shepard," unpublished DPhil diss. (University of Oxford, 1994), 1–33.

19. E.g., see H. A. Oberman, *The Impact of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); D. C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); and J. P. Donnelly, *Calvinism and Scholasticism in Vermigli's Doctrine of Man and Grace* (Leiden: Brill, 1975).

great success to the development of Reformed Orthodoxy in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, most notably in the work of Richard A. Muller.<sup>20</sup> Such scholarship has emphasized the need to interpret individual theologians as existing and working within established theological traditions (exegetical, doctrinal, philosophical, etc.) and to understand specific formulations of doctrine historically rather than dogmatically. This approach simply reflects sound historical methodology but is, of course, possible only when the question of the ultimate truth or falsehood of the points at issue is left on one side, something that has apparently been particularly difficult, perhaps understandably, for scholars in the field of doctrinal history.

Much of the small amount of work on Owen apparently has not benefited in any significant way from the more historically sensitive work on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and little attempt has been made to set him within the broader ongoing intellectual tradition. Instead, to give one example, Owen has been judged by one scholar almost solely by his fidelity to the theology of John Calvin.<sup>21</sup> While the systematic theologian may possibly be happy with this, from the historian's point of view the underlying presuppositions of such an approach are highly problematic for a number of reasons. First, the choice of Calvin, a sixteenth-century theologian, as the criterion for judging seventeenth-century theology is, historically speaking, an entirely arbitrary move. Even in the sixteenth century, Calvin was at best first among equals; his theology did not represent the entire Reformed tradition and was not the only model available to subsequent theologians. Of course, some scholars argue that Calvin's theology represents the truth and can therefore function as a basic criterion for analysis of theology in any subsequent era. In fact, this claim should immediately be subject to suspicion: what these scholars usually mean is that Calvin (or their interpretation of Calvin) agrees with their own beliefs. Such an approach is therefore highly subjective, unhistorical, and inappropriate as a framework for a historical analysis of seventeenth-century thought.

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20. R. A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree; PRRD1 and PRRD2; God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

21. See Clifford, *Atonement and Justification*, where a chapter titled "Authentic Calvinism" sets the benchmark by which Owen, Baxter et al. are to be judged.