

BOOK REVIEW

The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology

Carl R. Trueman

Carlisle, ENGLAND, Paternoster Press 1998

xii + 267 pp., paperback

ISBN 0-85364-798-4

Reviewed by Rev. Ron Hanko.

Carl Trueman has given us in this book a scholarly overview of John Owen's theology, and from that point of view alone the book is all but unique. Very few have had the courage to tackle Owen's writings or write an analysis of his theology. This is due in part, as Trueman himself suggests (p. 2), to a general neglect of Puritan theology, but must also be due to the sheer volume of Owen's works (16 volumes in the Banner of

Truth edition), and to the fact that Owen is never easy to read.

Trueman looks at Owen's theology especially from the viewpoint of his controversies with the Socinians, the Arminians, and with Richard Baxter, and gives many penetrating and valuable insights, not only into Owen's thinking but into the character and development of post-Reformation theology. His analysis, we believe, is accurate and a needed corrective to popular misrepresentations of those who followed Calvin and the other Reformers.

Trueman, therefore, spends a great deal of time answering the 'Calvin against the Calvinists' thesis, the notion that the Reformed theologians after Calvin corrupted

and perverted the 'pure Calvinism' of Calvin himself by their use of scholastic methods, the application of strict logic and rationalism, and a misplaced emphasis on predestination and other such doctrines. He answers especially the work of Alan Clifford (*Atonement and Justification; and Calvinus*) and Frank Boersma (*A Hot Peppercorn*), though others also are mentioned (Kendall, Rainbow, Torrance, Hall, Rolston).

This defense of Owen is, in fact, one of the major concerns of the book. Trueman, therefore does not just to give an overview of Owen's theology, but defends him and the other post-reformation Reformed theologians against the charges of contributing to a destructive betrayal of Reformed theology, especially with respect to the doctrine of the Atonement.

Believing rather that Owen and others like him stood where Calvin stood and built on his foundations, Trueman encapsulates his academic refutation of the "*Calvin against the Calvinists*" school by beginning his sixth chapter with these words:

As I was going up the stair,
I met a man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today.
Oh! How I wish he'd go away.

It is a remarkable fact, but the secondary literature surrounding the Protestantism of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is populated by men who were not actually there - not actually in those centuries, that is. It may well be that scholars were on the whole never foolish enough to subscribe to the popular myths about Calvinism epitomized in Mencken's definition of Puritanism as a 'haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy', but they have generated enough myths and factoids of their own to fill the void. Whether it is Beza, playing Stalin to Calvin's Lenin and almost single-handedly perverting the Reformed faith, or Zanchi rationalizing

Reformed theology into a *central-dogma* based upon a rigid form of Aristotelianism, or Perkins taking English Reformed thought out into the wasteland of despair created by voluntarist notions of faith - scholars have found no shortage of villains to blame for the directions taken by Reformed thought in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

It is, however, becoming increasingly clear that these sinister villains who prowl through the pages of the secondary scholarship bear little resemblance to the theologians who led the Reformed churches of their day. Indeed, as far as their 'crimes' are concerned, they have, to use a crude modern colloquialism, been 'framed'.... Once one has read the primary texts from a historical perspective, reading the analyses of such as Beza, etc. given by the old school is an experience not dissimilar from that described by the author of the above rhyme: it is like meeting a man who wasn't there, and whose continued presence is a source only of irritation and frustration (pp. 227, 228).

Trueman is especially hard on Alan Clifford in the book, and rightly so. He shows clearly that Clifford has, at the very least, seriously misread Owen by coming to Owen with an agenda of his own. Clifford's analysis is characterised by Trueman as 'seriously deficient' (p. 186, footnote), 'misleading' (p. 187, footnote), 'uncritical' (p. 216, footnote), given to 'unsound methodology' (p. 225, footnote), and based upon 'nonsensical presuppositions' (p. 12, footnote). He goes so far as to accuse Clifford of misrepresenting Owen, when he, Clifford, to prove a point, brings together from Owen's writings in one place and as one quotation two sections of text that are separated by 45 pages in Owen's writings! As Trueman says: 'if this approach is legitimate, then one might as well argue that "Judas went and hanged himself ... Go and do thou likewise" is a com-

mand explicitly taught in the Bible' (pp. 235, 236).

Over against Clifford and others Trueman shows (1) that Owen must be read in context, particularly of the times in which he lived; (2) that his use of Aristotelean terms by no means makes him guilty of carrying over Aristotelean philosophy into his theology; (3) that his theology represents not a departure from Reformed theology but a natural development of it as Owen himself believed; (4) that he was not "guilty" of rationalizing, but only of systematizing and working out the consequences of historic Calvinism, especially with regard to the atonement; and (5) that he is, in fact, in the main line of Reformed theology tracing back to Calvin himself.

He shows, too, and in some detail that Owen's theology was decidedly Trinitarian throughout (thus the subtitle of the book), and that this, rather than scholasticism or rationalism is the governing and over-arching principle of Owen's theology, as indeed it is. Even a cursory reading of Owen shows this, at least if one does not read Owen only to prove that Owen was guilty of perverting Reformed theology from its original purity and truth.

There is much other interesting material in the book. We found especially valuable the material on Owen's rejection of the traditional view of the necessity of the incarnation (pp. 105-109), his use of the analogy of faith (pp. 94-99), his understanding of the relationship between revelation and the nature of God (pp. 109-110), and his views on the sufficiency and efficiency of the atonement (pp. 199-206).

Two negative criticisms must be made, however. The first is that the book is overly scholarly, with an abundance of theological Latin terminology. This probably puts it beyond the capacity of most laymen and seriously limits its value. Perhaps this should not be said by way of criticising Trueman's book, but only by way of pleading for a similar book 'written down' to a more popular level. There is a great need for this. The battle for the truth is not fought in the cloudy heights of

scholarship, but in the trenches and by the ordinary members of the church. They would be well armed with much of the material in this book if it were written less technically.

The second negative criticism is more significant in our opinion. Perhaps in the interest of scholarship, but for whatever reason, Trueman distances himself from the question of whether or not Owen's theology is true. He says:

"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" (p. ix).

We question whether it is really possible to be totally objective concerning the truth of what is, after all, God's Word - the truth about God Himself and His gracious work, even when engaged in historical analysis. Much more we question whether it is right to treat such matters merely as matters for scholarly and historical debate. Certainly it is not a game, as Trueman himself suggests (p. 9). It was never that for Owen. Owen says (p. 92) 'that the primary purpose of theology is living to please God,' and with that we wholeheartedly concur. Theology and even the history of theology are never and can never be abstract matters. Trueman might learn something from Owen in that respect.

With those caveats, the book is highly recommended to those who are able to make use of it.