

John Owen

and the Covenant of Redemption

What are some of the things John Owen said about the Covenant of Redemption? did he think it was different than the Covenant of Grace?

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By C. Matthew McMahon

It is often the case through church history that people want to “own” the foremost theologians of the church in their system of theology; our day is no different. For instance, almost everyone would like to claim John Calvin as their own. Even Arminians have done this, claiming Calvin never wrote about limited atonement. Everyone desires to have John Calvin, the most distinguished and accomplished theologian in the history of the church, “on their side.” Who would not? Aligning one’s self with the “greats” of church history gives us a sense of “orthodoxy” in some respects. This same desire is attributed towards the English Puritan theologian John Owen. Owen has been deemed, rightly, as the greatest theologian who wrote in the English language, with possibly Jonathan Edwards as a rival. (And Edwards is another that many, including Arminians, attempt to claim for their own.) It is fair to say that John Owen has affected, and theologically persuaded, many future theologians and pastors on almost every side of the theological fence. Owen, though he is dead, still needs to be rescued from those who obscure his theological views surrounding Covenant Theology. There are far too many selective citings of Owen on the Covenant of Grace, over and against his theology surrounding the support of the logical necessity of the Covenant of Redemption.

In the realm of Covenant Theology, or Federal Theology, Owen’s work is quoted substantially and held in esteem by most scholars who have done any serious work in this area. However, there seems to be a roaming disagreement, as to where Owen stands, particularly in terms of the Covenant of Redemption and how that relates to the current debate in Covenant Theology. (“Current debate” meaning this last century where Covenant Theology has resurged *again* in academic circles under scholarly scrutiny.) The Covenant of Grace (the Redemptive purposes of God in time) are quoted extensively, where, many times they are not tied to Owen’s conception of the Covenant of Redemption. It is the purpose of this short article to explore Owen’s conceptions the Covenant of Redemption, and how this fits into the overall theological framework of “covenant” for him, especially the Covenant of Grace. In doing this, it is unavoidable to touch upon the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace since Owen ties the definition of “covenant” to all three. (It should be noted that Owen saw four clear covenants – Covenant of Redemption, Covenant of Works, Covenant of Grace and the Covenant on Sinai.)

What is a covenant? According to Owen, the Covenant of Works subsists in the foundation or template for all covenants. He says, “The whole entire nature of the covenant of works consisted in this, — that upon our personal obedience, according unto the law and rule of it, we should be accepted with God, and rewarded with him. *Herein the essence of it did consist; and whatever covenant proceeds on these terms, or has the nature of them in it, however it may be varied with additions or alterations, is the same covenant still, and not another.* As in the renovation of the promise wherein the essence of the covenant of grace was contained, God did oftentimes make other additions unto it (as unto Abraham and David), *yet was it still the same covenant for the substance of it, and not another; so whatever variations may be made in, or additions unto, the dispensation of the first covenant, so long as this rule is retained, “Do this, and live,” it is still the same covenant for the substance and essence of it.*” (5:275, Emphasis Mine) This is striking in that Owen templates the structure of “covenant” in “do this and live.” Even in terms of making a covenant with men in the Covenant of Grace, Owen still defines the covenant as a pact or agreement when he says, “Now, a covenant between God and man is a thing great and marvellous, whether we consider the nature of it or the ends of it. In its own nature *it is a convention, compact, and agreement for*

some certain ends and purposes between the holy Creator and his poor creatures. How infinite, how unspeakable must needs the grace and condescension of God in this matter be! For what is poor miserable man, that God should set his heart upon him, — that he should, as it were, give bounds to his sovereignty over him, and enter into terms of *agreement* with him?” (6:470) He also demonstrates that the Covenant of Grace is a continuation, or completion of all previous covenants, and is ultimately based, through Redemptive History, on the Covenant of Redemption (i.e. the works based covenant to fulfill the demands of the Lawgiver), “The new covenant [i.e. the Covenant of Grace] as a re-collecting into one all the promises of grace given from the foundation of the world, accomplished in the actual exhibition of Christ, and confirmed by his death, and by the sacrifice of his blood, thereby becoming the sole rule of new spiritual ordinances of worship suited thereunto, was the great object of the faith of the saints of the Old Testament, and it the great foundation of all our present mercies.” (Hebrews 6:113) Within the Covenant of Redemption, where the Son enters into a covenant with the Father to “do His will” for the Redemption of his elect, Owen also describes this “covenant” as a “compact. He says, “The third act of this sending is his entering into covenant and *compact* with his Son concerning the work to be undertaken, and the issue or event thereof.” Owen describes the Covenant of Redemption as a covenant where the Son must work, based on the Father’s decree to send Him to save and redeem sinners, “so as that God might be everlastingly glorified in the work which he was designed unto, and which by him he had to accomplish.” (Hebrews, 3:78) This Owen links to the creative power of the Son in framing the worlds, that there would be a context in which His work would take place. However, though the Son takes up the “work” decreed for Him to accomplish, if men attempt to take up this work themselves, they will consistently fail. Owen says, “Those who seek him according to the law of works, and by the best of their obedience thereunto, shall never find him as a rewarder, nor attain that which they seek after; as the apostle expressly declares, Romans 9:31, 32.” (Hebrews, 6:56) The reason for this failure is their mutable inability to uphold the demands of the Law in any covenant.

Owen did not see the Covenant of Works as restated formally in the Covenant at Sinai. (cf. Hebrews, 3:398ff) The failure of Adam, and the broken covenant in the garden, is something that no man, consequently, can uphold as a result of the fall. The Covenant made at Sinai was “materially” the same, as Owen says, (i.e. that it was based on the righteous character of God and His Law) but it was “changed, altered and removed” based on the work of Christ in the Covenant of Grace. (6:471) Owen did believe the Covenant at Sinai was housed within the framework of the Covenant of Grace, and it mirrored the Covenant of Works in certain aspects, but it held stipulations of its own, being “Mosaical” or “ceremonial” in a great number of respects. Yet, though it held different aspects to it, it was still under the same definition of “covenant” that he originally gave us in the foregoing paragraphs. The covenant at Sinai restated and reinstated, in its own particular manner, the stipulations, both blessings and curse, of the former Covenant of Works, making obedience (something man can never accomplish) a requisite of the covenant. But Owen explains that the Covenant at Sinai never intended to replace the Covenant of works, but confirm it. He says, “God had before given the *covenant of works*, or perfect obedience, unto all mankind, in the law of creation. But this covenant at Sinai did not abrogate or disannul that covenant, nor any way fulfill it. And the reason is, because it was never intended to come in the place or room thereof, as a covenant, containing an entire rule of all the faith and obedience of the whole church. God did not intend in it to abrogate the covenant of works, and to substitute this in the place thereof; yea, in sundry things it reinforced, established, and confirmed that covenant.” (Hebrews 6:93, AS) He goes on to demonstrate the conditional character of blessing and curse, “The absolute perpetuity of the law and its worship, —that is, of the covenant at Sinai, — is the principal, fundamental article of their present faith, or rather unbelief.” (Hebrews, 6:123, AS)

So we see in the Covenant of Works, in the Covenant of Grace, and in the Covenant of Redemption, Owen describes the covenant in terms of a compact or agreement. Defining “covenant” in terms of the Covenant of Redemption as *conditional* is the norm for Owen’s overall theological structure. However, this definition for Owen does not simply rest in the above ideas. Though “covenant” in general is an agreement between two parties, and is the essential definition of “covenant,” yet, it also must be more precisely *clarified* since covenants made by and with God are of a peculiar nature based on God’s inability to change or waiver. This is true especially in light of the reality that God, in the Covenant of Redemption, takes up both sides of the agreement, and in the Covenant of Grace sends a Mediator to mediate on behalf of consistent covenant *breakers*. Owen states, “And it must be observed, that although

I use the name of a “covenant,” as we have rendered the word $\delta\iota\alpha\theta\eta\kappa\eta$, because the true signification of that word will more properly occur unto us in another place, yet I do not understand thereby a covenant properly and strictly so called, but such a one as hath the nature of a testament also, wherein the good things of him that makes it are bequeathed unto them for whom they are designed. “ (Hebrews, 6:74)

In having set a basic foundation for Owen’s view of “covenant” (i.e. conditional upon obedience, though with clarification as to each particular covenant based on the recipients and the Mediator), we turn to the Covenant of Redemption in Owen’s writings. Owen is describing here the “dispensation of Christ’s being punished for us, which also hath influence into his whole mediation on our behalf. This is that compact, covenant, convention, or agreement, that was between the Father and the Son, for the accomplishment of the work of our redemption by the mediation of Christ, to the praise of the glorious grace of God.” (12:496) The Covenant of Redemption is a “compact” or “agreement” made between the Father and the Son before the world began. It is the foundation for everything that God will do in time in redeeming His bride for Himself. Owen defines it this way, “The will of the Father appointing and designing the Son to be the head, husband, deliverer, and redeemer of his elect, his church, his people, whom he did foreknow, with the will of the Son voluntarily, freely undertaking that work and all that was required thereunto, is that compact (for in that form it is proposed in the Scripture) that we treat of.” (12:496) Owen is quite clear. The pact or agreement made is conditional upon the obedience of the Son. The Son freely, and voluntarily takes up the work of redeeming the bride. It is no argument against this, as some say, that since the Son could not fail, being God (immutable and unwavering) that this cannot be rightly seen as “covenant” in the manner in which Owen defines it. Rather, it can be broken if the Son, voluntarily and freely, decides He does not want to partake of this agreement. It is certain that this is not the case, and that the Son’s will is the same as the Father’s, as is the Spirit’s. That still does not change the nature of “covenant” as Owen has defined it. He explains this in the following, “It is true, the will of God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, is but one. It is a natural property, and where there is but one nature there is but one will: but in respect of their distinct personal actings, this will is appropriated to them respectively, so that the will of the Father and the will of the Son may be considered [distinctly] in this business; which though essentially one and the same, yet in their distinct personality it is distinctly considered, as the will of the Father and the will of the Son. Notwithstanding the unity of essence that is between the Father and the Son, yet is the work distinctly carried on by them; so that the same God judges and becomes surety, satisfieth and is satisfied, in these distinct persons.” (6:497) Even though this is true, and all wills are respective to the Godhead in this manner, Owen concludes in this the definition of the Covenant of Redemption, “Thus, though this covenant be eternal, and the object of it be that which might not have been, and so it hath the nature of the residue of God’s decrees in these regards, yet because of this distinct acting of the will of the Father and the will of the Son with regard to each other, it is more than a decree, and hath the proper nature of a *covenant* or compact.” (6:497, Emphasis his.)

Next, Owen “proceeds to manifest” how this covenant is declared and explained in Scripture. He says it is clearly expressed in the following Scriptures, and cites, Hebrews 10:7; Psalms 16:2, 22:1, 40:8, 45:7, 60:7-8; Micah 5:4, John 20:27, Rev. 3:13. (12:498, cf. 499ff) The character of these passages are contained well in the “book of the covenant,” the book of Hebrews, as Owen cites and explains this Covenant of Redemption all through his commentary on that book. Hebrews 10:7 says, “Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God.”

Owen describes this Covenant of Redemption as having 5 things “required to the complete establishing and accomplishing of such a pact or agreement.” (12:498) Here Owen is going to place the idea of “covenant” in its first and primary form. The first thing is that there “be sundry persons, two at least, namely, a promiser and undertaker, *agreeing voluntarily* together in counsel and design for the accomplishment and bringing about some common end acceptable to them both, so agreeing together.” (12:498) As Owen continues to stand upon his previous statements concerning the nature of “covenant,” he defines this eternal and everlasting “pact” or agreement” as between two parties, agreeing together. Secondly, “that the *person* promising, who is the principal engager in the covenant, do require *something* at the hand of the other, to be done or undergone, wherein he is concerned. He is to prescribe something to him, which is the condition whereon the accomplishment of the end aimed at is to depend.” These are the conditions of the covenant. The one entering into the covenant must fulfill the contract otherwise he breaks the contract. And the initiator of the contract must fulfill his end of the contract or else it is broken.

Thirdly, “that he make to him who doth undertake such promises as are necessary for his *supportment* and encouragement, and which may fully balance, in his judgment and esteem, all that is required of him or prescribed to him.” In other words, it is the Father who will, by decree, bestow the ability to perform the covenant agreement by the power of the Spirit given to Christ without measure. If the Father requires obedience, but does not fulfill the needs of the Mediator (i.e. the humanity of Christ), then the Father breaks the covenant and a lawsuit could be enacted. Fourthly, that upon the *weighing and consideration of the condition and promise*, the duty and reward prescribed and engaged for, as formerly mentioned, the undertaker do voluntarily address himself to the one, and expect the accomplishment of the other.” Unless both parties involved fulfill their respective ends, in anticipation of each other’s involvement, then the covenant would never work. Fifthly, “that, the accomplishment of the condition being pleaded by the *undertaker* and approved by the *promiser*, the common end originally designed be brought about and established.” (12:499. Emphasis are all his.) After listing the necessary requirements of “covenant” Owen says, “These five things are required to the entering into and complete accomplishment of such a covenant, convention, or agreement as is built on personal performances; and they are all eminently expressed in the Scripture, and to be found in the compact between the Father and the Son whereof we speak...” (12:499)

After initially setting forth the definition of the Covenant of Redemption, Owen demonstrates from Scripture those classic passages upholding this covenant. He states, “There are the Father and the Son as distinct persons agreeing together in counsel for the accomplishment of the common end, — the glory of God and the salvation of the elect. The end is expressed, Hebrews 2:9, 10, Hebrews 12:2. Now, thus it was, Zechariah 6:13, “The counsel of peace shall be between them both,” — “*Inter ambos ipsos.*” That is, the two persons spoken of, not the two offices there intimated, that shall meet in Christ. And who are these? The Lord Jehovah, who speaks, and the man whose name is *tsemach*, “The Branch,” verse 12, who is to do all the great things there mentioned: “He shall grow up,” etc. But the counsel of peace, the design of our peace, is between them both; they have agreed and consented to the bringing about of our peace.” After substantiating Hebrews 2 and 12, he mentions the “counsel of peace” in Zechariah 6:13, demonstrating the Lord and the Branch agreeing to covenant together. Then, Owen makes an interesting point with a passage that is not commonly used. He quotes Isaiah 9:6, not in relation to the incarnation (the context normally used) but of the Covenant of Redemption, “Hence is that name of the Son of God, Isaiah 9:6, “Wonderful Counsellor.” It is in reference to the business there spoken of that he is so called. This is expressed at the beginning of the verse, “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.” To what end that was is known, namely, that he might be a Savior or a Redeemer, whence he is afterward called “The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace;” that is, a father to his church and people in everlasting mercy, the grand author of their peace, that procured it for them and established it unto them.” (12:630 AS)

Owen then ratifies his own explanation of the Covenant of Redemption with this statement, “The first thing, then, is manifest, that there was a voluntary concurrence and distinct consent of the Father and Son for the accomplishment of the work of our peace, and for bringing us to God.” (12:501) The language here is striking, and is often neglected. The basic form of covenant, even the Covenant of Redemption which had been prepared before the world began, is based upon “voluntary concurrence.” What often dissuades contemporary theologians and preachers from terminology like this is a result of their confusion in explaining the Covenant of Redemption as the Covenant of Grace. In Owen’s mind one certainly provides for the other, but they are distinct. In today’s Reformed circles, these distinctions are often blurred, mixed, confused, and, in a word, *misunderstood*. The force of this standard of “voluntary concurrence” is given a context in Owen’s next paragraph, “For the accomplishment of this work, the Father, who is principal in the covenant, the promiser, whose love “sets all on work,” as is frequently expressed in the Scripture, requires of the Lord Jesus Christ, his Son, that *he shall do that which, upon consideration of his justice, glory, and honor, was necessary to be done for the bringing about the end proposed, prescribing to him a law for the performance thereof; which is called his “will” so often in Scripture.*” (12:501 Emphasis his.)

How is the Son to take up this “agreement” with the Father? Owen says that the Son executes this covenant, not negatively, by way of making the “blood of bulls and goats” effectual, but positively, in His own offices of prophet, priest and king. At this point, Owen describes the manner of the office bearer in 1)

that Christ would take on a human nature, 2) that in this human nature he should be a servant and yield obedience, and 3) that he should suffer and undergo “what justice is due to him that he was to deliver.” (12:503)

Owen continues his description of the pact by demonstrating that the promises are made between the Father and Son upon supposition that each will fulfill his duty to the other. He cites Isaiah 42:4, 42:6, Psalm 16:10; 89:28, and Isaiah 50:5-9 for support. In the duties of the work itself, he cites Hebrews 12:2, Isaiah 42:1-4 and Hebrews 7:28 for support. Christ is the High Priest forever. Thus, there is a distinction in the mind of Owen in the manner in which one will exposit the various covenants found in the books of Hebrews; i.e. he makes distinctions between the Covenant of Redemption and Covenant of Grace when dealing with the book as a whole and how they relate to one another.

In continuing in his 12th volume describing this pact as the Covenant of Redemption in detail, Owen explains that the Lord Jesus “accepts of the condition” of the covenant. This is something that anyone entering into a covenant must do when the covenant stipulations are placed on them. That does not mean fallen men, in and of themselves, can fulfill any covenant obligation upon them; even in the case of Adam, being perfect but mutable he failed to keep covenant as well. But the Covenant of Redemption demonstrates that the Father is going to bestow the ability and power of the Spirit on the Mediator that this task will be accomplished. In terms of the Covenant of Redemption breaking out into time and upon the Covenant of Grace, Owen demonstrates that men conditionally enter into covenant, but by the *unconditional* nature of grace enabling them to do so. Thus, the effect of the Covenant of Redemption has profound implications on the manner in which any theologian or preacher understands the nature of the Covenant of Grace. This will be seen in the time-demonstration of the Covenant of Redemption as the Covenant of Grace later.

Owen describes the foundational nature of the Covenant of Redemption in terms of Law when he says, “He voluntarily engaged himself into this sponson; but when he had so done, he was legally subject to all that attended it, — when he had put his name into the obligation, he became responsible for the whole debt. And all that he did or suffered comes to be called “obedience;” which relates to the law that he was subject to, having engaged himself to his Father, and said to the LORD, “Thou art my Lord; lo, I come to do thy will.” (12:505) Christ legally enters into a binding contract of Law with the Lawgiver. Yet, the Lawgiver must fulfill the needs for help in the contract or the contract is broken. In this mutual agreement, “God the Father accepts of the performance of what was to the Son prescribed.” (12:505) He cites Isaiah 49:5-9, “And now, saith the LORD that formed me from the womb *to be* his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall be my strength. And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth. Thus saith the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, *and* his Holy One, to him whom man despiseth, to him whom the nation abhorreth, to a servant of rulers, Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the LORD that is faithful, *and* the Holy One of Israel, and he shall choose thee. Thus saith the LORD, In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages; That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that *are* in darkness, Shew yourselves. They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures *shall be* in all high places.” (cf. his other citations of Psalm 2:7-8; Acts 13:33; Romans 1:4; Daniel 9:24; John 17; Hebrews 9:24; Job 33:24.)

Owen then concludes, in volume 12, by saying, “And this, I say, is the covenant and compact that was between Father and Son, which is the great foundation of what hath been said and shall farther be spoken about the merit and satisfaction of Christ. Here lies the ground of the righteousness of the dispensation treated of, that Christ should undergo the punishment due to us: It was done voluntarily, of himself, and he did nothing but what he had power to do, and command from his Father to do. “I have power,” saith he, “to lay down my life, and I have power to take it again; this commandment have I received of my Father;” whereby the glory both of the love and justice of God is exceedingly exalted.” (12:507) The result of the fulfillment of this covenant, based on law, based on agreement and pact, Owen

says is “exaltation” of the Mediator. (He cites Isaiah 53:12; Zechariah 9:10; Psalm 110:6; Psalm 2:8-9; Psalm 72:8; Daniel 7:14; Romans 14:11; Isaiah 45:23; Philippians 2:10.)

Upon an interesting note, Owen believes that when Jesus refers to the Father while incarnate He is referring to the Covenant of Redemption. Such is the case with John 4:34, “Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.” Jesus is under “another’s will,” is “sent,” and has come to “finish the work” He started.

How does the Covenant of Grace relate to the Covenant of Redemption? The Covenant of Grace, for Owen, is the expression of the Covenant of Redemption in time. They are not the same covenant, as was stated previously, but the Covenant of Grace depends on the Covenant of Redemption for its existence. Owen foundates everything that happens in time on an orthodox Theology Proper and the immutable nature of the divine decree (e.g. 11:210). Thus, the irrevocable decree of election is bound up, for Owen, in the Covenant of Redemption. The Mediator, as we saw, is placed under stipulations to fulfill the offices of prophet, priest and king in time. In doing so, He fulfills the Lawgiver’s “law” and ratifies the Covenant of Redemption, substantiating the Covenant of Grace. Owen rightly believes that the Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace are enacted and fulfilled by God; either through the eternal pact, or Testator of the New Covenant. How is this so? He says that in the Covenant of Grace it is the “undertaking of God on both sides in this covenant” that makes all the difference. (11:211) How then, is there a differentiation between these two? Is it simply a matter of one decreed before the foundation of the world, and the other within the context of a created order, both “seemingly” the same covenant? Owen’s definition of “covenant” will not allow this distinction. He has already made the distinction that the Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace are different. One is an inner-Trinitarian pact, and the other is between God and man. How then, can Owen say that the Covenant of Grace is something God accomplishes “on both sides” and still be distinctive? The answer to this lies in the unfolding of Redemptive History, and the manner in which the Covenant of Grace is executed between God and men, but fulfilled by Christ’s work – the result of the Covenant of Redemption.

The Covenant of Redemption is established in eternity, but works itself out in time in the Covenant of Grace. Jesus Christ fulfills the law made in the pact with the Father to be the Mediator for His bride – all those whom will be elect. Election, for Owen is established in eternity past, but applied in the Covenant of Grace in time. That does not, for Owen, make the Covenant of Grace solely internal. There is an external nature to it. When God obligates men to perform by law that which is required of them, they are unable to comply to those standards unless the regenerating power of the Spirit removes their heart of stone, and bestows upon them a heart of flesh, and new life. That is why men need a Mediator, because the conditions of the covenant, as Owen describes “Do this and live,” are unattainable unless they are given new life. And even then, God, on both sides, in covenanting with men, and supplying a Mediator for men, stabilizes the covenant so men may truly have life by grace. (Owen likes the word “stable” in this respect, for without God stabilizing the Covenant of Grace on both sides, men would never be redeemed.) Listen to how Owen describes this with Abraham, “This is that which God engageth himself unto in this covenant of grace, that he will for everlasting be a God to him [Abraham] and his faithful seed. Though the external administration of the covenant was given to Abraham and his carnal seed, yet the effectual dispensation of the grace of the covenant is peculiar to them only who are the children of the promise, the remnant of Abraham according to election, with all that in all nations were to be blessed in him and in his seed, Christ Jesus.” (11:284) This seems contradictory at first glance. How could the completion of the Covenant of Grace, being gracious, be made with “him” (that is Abraham) and his “seed” after him? In Owen’s distinction of the Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace this should be clear. Owen has absolutely no problem in stating that in every covenant made, there are *conditions* to be met. In the external administration of the Covenant of Grace, that which pertains to the New Covenant in the New Testament as well as its expression in the Old Testament, men must meet specific requirements in order to be saved. But they cannot. God must then “take up both sides.” This is why the Covenant of Redemption is so important in Owen’s overall view of Covenant Theology. Jesus Christ, as Mediator, places all the responsibility, in time, under the law, on Himself, for all those for whom He will live and die. Men, then, by virtue of Christ’s work, are graciously saved and regenerated. That does not mean that only the regenerate live and move in the Covenant of Grace. Abraham and *his seed* are covenanted with God. But it certainly means, by Owen’s own definition, that only the elect participate in the *fruits* of the

Covenant of Redemption. That is why when the threatenings concerning breaking covenant with God are given, as Owen says, they “are moral acts, not declarative, as to particular persons, of God’s eternal purposes, but subservient to other ends, together with the law itself...” (11:168)

The Covenant of Redemption cannot be broken. (12:497ff) The Father and the Son have immutably fulfilled it. The Covenant of Grace, *for the elect*, cannot be broken because it logically flows from the Covenant of Redemption. However, those “covenanted” with God, who are not regenerate, something Owen contends for, will always break the covenant and enact the threatenings held in the sign placed upon them. (16:258ff) That does not break or distort the work of the Mediator for those whom He has been Mediator. It does, though, place all others covenanted in this way under the covenant obligations, or as Owen says “conditions”, either of the Old Testament covenants or of the New Covenant under the Gospel that they can never keep. But for the elect, the blessedness of the Covenant of Grace is seen in these words, something that Owen everywhere testifies to, “Whom God accepts in Christ, he will continue to do so for ever; whom he quickens to walk with him, they shall do it to the end. And these three things, *acceptance with God, holiness from God, and a defense upon them* both unto the end, all free and in Christ, are that threefold cord of the covenant of grace which cannot be broken.”(11:179) Part of the confusion here is due to the fact that many make the Covenant of Grace too restrictive. They do not allow for Owen’s “covenant” definition, and therefore concluded that the Covenant of Grace is something brand “new”, not a renewal of anything former, and made internally, without any external portions, only with the elect. In each “covenant” that God enters into, Owen says, “that God’s solemn *renewal* of the covenant at any time is called his making of or entering into covenant needs no labor to prove.” (11:214, Emphasis mine.) In other words, in each instance we find a “renewal” of the former promises given to God’s people they enter into the Covenant of Grace with Him, and each “making” of it, is a renewal of the former, but then progressive. This is where Owen emphatically disagrees, even if only on the basis of the Covenant of Redemption, with those who would “simply” equate the Covenant of Grace with salvation; i.e. that the Covenant of Grace only contains inward and no outward expressions, or it only provides a context for the regenerate and not unbelievers. Owen is quite explicit, all through his writings, that there is a temporary nature to temporary covenants. So he says, “It is true, the application of the promises here looks immediately unto temporals, but yet, being drawn out from the testimony of the continuance of the presence of God with his saints, doth much more powerfully conclude to spirituals.” (11:251) From temporary to spiritual in the same covenant? The answer is “Yes,” for Owen.

It would be correct, in Owen’s mind, to say that salvation is coextensive for the elect in the Covenant of Grace by the blessings imparted by the Covenant of Redemption. But, it would also be correct, in Owen’s mind, to say that salvation is not coextensive in the Covenant of Grace for those who are not elect, that is why Owen had no problem admitting infants in the Covenant of Grace in any administration of it. To use an example of this by Owen, he clearly describes how promises are not conditional, “That these promises of God do not properly, and as to their original rise, depend on any *conditions* in believers, or by them to be fulfilled, but are the fountains and springs of all conditions whatever that are required to be in them or expected from them, though the grace and obedience of believers are often mentioned in them as the means whereby they are carried on, according to the appointment of God, unto the enjoyment of what is promised or continued in it. This one consideration, that there is in very many of these promises an express *non obstante*, or a notwithstanding the want of any such condition as might seem to be at the bottom and to be the occasion of any such promise or engagement of the grace of God, is sufficient to give light and evidence to this assertion. If the Lord saith expressly that he will do so with men, though it be not so with them, his doing of that thing cannot depend on any such thing in them.” (11:237-238) In other words, the gracious aspect of the promises contain in the Mediator are not given based on any condition in the grantee. If there were, no one would ever come to faith, because they do not have the ability to do so. Here, logically, Owen is resting on the immutable nature of the character of God and the Covenant of Redemption. The Covenant of Grace is where this immutable decree is exacted on any given individual. But this sphere called “the Covenant of Grace” by definition, still requires conditional obedience. This is no contradiction because the Mediator fulfills the contract on behalf of the grantee, or as Owen said, on “behalf of believers.” This is why Owen can so easily demonstrate the perseverance of the saints (a large topic in volume 11), over and against those who would place some condition on belief, even though God requires all men, everywhere, to repent.

The power of salvation is found in the Covenant of Redemption, expressed in time in the sphere or context of the Covenant of Grace. Sinclair Ferguson in his book on Owen, "John Owen on the Christian Life" says this, "The covenant of grace thus depends upon the covenant of redemption as its foundation, and for its saving power." (Page 27) Owen says, "So the covenant of grace is said to be established upon these promises, Hebrews 8:6; that is, the grace and mercy of the covenant, and the usefulness of it to the ends of a covenant, to keep God and man together in peace and agreement, are laid upon these promises, to be by them confirmed and established unto us, God having by them revealed his good-will unto us, with an attendancy of stipulation of duty. (1:315) What is "*the covenant*" in this statement surrounding stipulation on the *New Covenant*? It is the Covenant of Redemption. Again, that is where the power of salvation, election, predestination and all the promises of God are "yes and amen" in Christ Jesus. To refresh our memories, he says, "Neither will that at all assist which is affirmed, namely, "That in *all* covenants, — and his promise holdeth out a covenant, — there must be a condition on both sides:" for, we willingly grant that in his covenant of grace God doth promise something to us, and requireth something of us, and that these two have mutual dependence one upon another; but we also affirm that in the very covenant itself God hath graciously promised to work effectually in us those things which he requireth of us, and that herein it mainly differeth from the covenant of works, which he hath abolished. But such a covenant as wherein God should promise to be a God unto us upon a condition by us and in our own strength to be fulfilled, and on the same account continued in unto the end, we acknowledge not, nor can, whilst our hearts have any sense of the love of the Father, the blood of the Son, or the grace of the Holy Spirit, the fountains thereof." (11:360) If one can make logical sense of this last quote, they can only do so in establishing this covenant in the Covenant of Redemption, as Owen does. That is why in the Covenant of Grace his distinction between grace and obedience is not contradictory.

There is a wave of theological error purporting that the New Covenant, or Covenant of Grace fully expressed in the New Testament, was a "brand new," or as some parrot Hebrews, "better" covenant, but translate this theologically as "wholly different." Owen does not. He says that this "new" covenant in Hebrew 8 is "A *recapitulation, collection, and confirmation of all the promises of grace* that had been given unto the church from the beginning, even all that was spoken by the mouth of the holy prophets that had been since the world began, Luke 1:70. The first promise contained in it the whole essence and substance of the covenant, of grace. All those afterwards given unto the church, on various occasions, were but explications and confirmations of it. In the whole of them there was a full declaration of the wisdom and love of God in sending his Son, and of his grace unto mankind thereby. And God solemnly confirmed them with his oath, namely, that they should be all accomplished in their appointed season. Whereas, therefore, the covenant here promised included the sending of Christ for the accomplishment of those promises, they are all gathered into one head therein. It is a constellation of all the promises of grace." (Hebrews, 6:112) It is not, in Owen's mind, "brand new," since anything that demonstrated a "type" or "shadow" in the Old Testament of something in the New Testament, and that fulfills it, cannot be logically called "new." But, then, how does Owen define "better?" First, it should be noted that Owen is contrasting the Covenant made at *Sinai* with the New Covenant in Christ. He is not contrasting the Abrahamic Covenant with the New, for with Owen, the Abrahamic and New Covenant are the same, simply that the New Covenant is *recapitulated* (a word he uses often). Note above that Owen quotes Luke 1:70, the fulfillment promise of Christ in the Abrahamic covenant. Owen defines this difference between the old covenant at Sinai and the New covenant in Christ (Covenant of Grace of which the Old was part of but distinguished) not that it is "brand new" but different by comparison in degree. (Hebrews, 6:53) In Owen's words, it is "the best God ever gave" over and against the old covenant at Sinai. It is not that they are new, as in "brand new" respecting none of the promises already made to Abraham, but that the expression of them is better than anything God has ever given. How then do obedience and grace work in this new covenant? Owen says, "although faith be required in order of nature antecedently unto our actual receiving of the pardon of sin, yet is that faith itself wrought in us by the grace of the promise, and so its precedency unto pardon respects only the order that God had appointed in the communication of the benefits of the covenant, and intends not that the pardon of sin is the reward of our faith." (6:69) So the difference does not lie in the basic definition of "covenant" but in the manner in which regeneration precedes all those who will actually keep covenant. Owen ratifies this in saying, "By the *new covenant*, not the new covenant absolutely and originally, as given in the first promise, is intended; but in its complete gospel administration, when it was actually established by the death of Christ, as administered in and by the ordinances of the new testament. This, with the covenant of Sinai, were, as most say, but

different administrations of the same covenant." (6:70, Emphasis mine.) Owen then spends another page outlining why it is different administrations of the same covenant. (cf. 6:71ff) He sums this up in saying, "The judgment of most reformed divines is, that the church under the old testament had the same promise of Christ, the same interest in him by faith, remission of sins, reconciliation with God, justification and salvation by the same way and means, that believers have under the new. And whereas the essence and the substance of the covenant consists in these things, they are not to be said to be under *another covenant*, but only a *different administration* of it. But this was so different from that which is established in the gospel after the coming of Christ, that it hath the appearance and name of another covenant." (6:71)

After stating that the new is not "brand new", Owen describes how the new is different than the old. The first manner in which there is a differentiation is "the way and manner of the declaration." (6:71) In other words, God is more clear in the New Testament, *but not different in the manner in which He saves, or works*. Owen says that in the New Testament God speaks "plainly." That does not change the substance of the Covenant of Grace. For in any administration its power belongs to the Covenant of Redemption. Secondly, he says we receive "a plentiful effusion of grace." (6:72) In other words, those in the Old Testament, as Owen says, "had true, real, saving, grace communicated unto them," just like those in the New Testament do. However, more people in the New Testament in the covenant community have this than in the old. (That statement, in and of itself, is a death-blow to Dispensational thought, at least according to John Owen.) Thirdly, there is a difference in our "manner of access unto God." (6:73) This is the difference of the gospel administration of externals, in comparison to the Old Testament externals of the ceremonial laws. Fourthly, "in the way of worship required under each administration" Owen says there is a difference. Again, this is tied to the Old Testament ceremonial laws and rites, where in the New Testament is primarily spiritual, but not without its sacraments. Fifthly, and finally, Owen says there is a "difference in the extent of the dissipation of the grace of God." (6:73) He says, "For under the old testament it was upon the matter confined unto the posterity of Abraham according to the flesh; but under the new testament it extends itself unto all nations under heaven." (6:73)

There is much more to be said in conjunction with Owen's views on Covenant Theology. However, in simply reproducing page after page of Owen's *Works*, including delving into his separately published work (which is quite good) called *Biblical Theology*, the reader would tire (and may already be so.) To sum up Owen's position, then, simply: Owen believes every covenant in the Bible is conditional – blessing and curse based on the stipulations of the pact or agreement of two voluntary parties. The Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace are distinct, though one provides a context for the other. The Covenant of Grace is the sphere in which God works, handling both believers and unbelievers in that context upon condition of their obedience. Their obedience is only possible if the Covenant of Redemption is applied to them within the Covenant of Grace, making the voluntary concurrence of those in agreement with God based on the grace of Christ, the Mediator of the Covenant of Redemption. The Covenant of Redemption cannot be broken, but the Covenant of Grace is often broken; "do this and live" is an impossibility and it is only through the Mediator that anyone is able to "live." The New Covenant, or the Abrahamic Covenant revived, knowing there is essentially on one essence of the covenant in time, is made with the elect and their seed, being of course, the "renewed" Abrahamic covenant now made "better" or more clearly established, as Owen exegetes Hebrews and defines this precisely. The Covenant at Sinai is removed, in that its ceremonial nature is no longer needed since the Mediator of the Covenant of Redemption has fulfilled His work completely in time. With these in mind in connection with the Covenant of Redemption, consideration should taken to rightly exemplify Owen's position in any theological writing on the covenants.

For a very basic overview of this same information in published form, see Sinclair Ferguson's work, "John Owen on the Christian Life" published by Banner of Truth. Ferguson has both a section on the Covenant of Redemption as well a page or so on the Covenant of Grace from Owen's perspective.