

JOHN OWEN AND NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY:

Owen on the Old and New Covenants and the Functions of the Decalogue in Redemptive History in Historical and Contemporary Perspective

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John Owen was a giant in the theological world of seventeenth-century England. He is possibly the greatest English theologian ever. His learning was deep and his writings thorough and profound. He has left the Christian Church a legacy few have equaled in volume, fewer yet in content. In saying this, however, we must also recognize that some things Owen said are difficult to understand. Some statements may even appear contradictory if he is not followed carefully and understood in light of his comprehensive thought and the Reformation and Post-Reformation Protestant Scholastic world in which he wrote.

If we read some of the difficult sections of Owen's writings without understanding his comprehensive thought and the theological world in which he wrote, or in a superficial manner, some statements may seem to mean things they do not. When this is done, authors are misunderstood and sometimes, subsequent theological movements are aligned with them without substantial and objective warrant. Two instances of this involve John Owen and New Covenant Theology (NCT).

John Reisinger claims that Owen viewed the Old Covenant¹ as "a legal/works covenant."² He says:

This covenant was conditional because it was a legal/works covenant that promised life and threatened death. Israel failed to earn the blessings promised in the covenant. But under the New Covenant, the Church becomes the Israel of God and all her members are kings and priests (a kingdom of priests). Christ, as our Surety (Heb. 7:22), has kept the Old Covenant for us and earned every blessing it promised.³

The reader of Owen's treatise on the Old and New Covenants (in his Hebrews commentary) will quickly realize that Reisinger does not give the full picture of Owen's position. Owen did not view the Old Covenant as a covenant of works *in itself*. He viewed it as containing a renewal of the original covenant of works imposed upon Adam in the Garden of Eden,⁴ something Reisinger emphatically denies.⁵ Moreover, Owen did not teach that Christ "kept the Old Covenant for us

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¹ The phrase "Old Covenant" will be used throughout as a synonym for "Mosaic or Sinai Covenant."

² John G. Reisinger, *Tablets of Stone* (Southbridge, MA: Crown Publications, Inc., 1989), 36.

³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 22:78, 80, 81, 89, 142. Owen viewed the Old Covenant as containing a works-inheritance principle of the broken covenant of works. The reintroduction of this element of the covenant of works, however, functioned on a typological level under the Old Covenant and applied to temporal promises and threats alone. See Mark W. Karlberg, *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 167, 184, 217, 218, 248, 273, 346, and 366 for a similar understanding of the works principle of the Old Covenant as it relates to the covenant of works on the typological level of kingdom administration.

⁵ The following is taken from John G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998), 129. He denies both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace as traditionally understood. "Some time ago I discussed the basic theme of this book with a group of Reformed ministers that was about equally divided on the

and earned every blessing it promised.”⁶ On the contrary, Owen taught that obedience or disobedience to the Old Covenant in itself neither *eternally* saved nor *eternally* condemned anyone and that its promises were temporal and only for Israel while the Old Covenant lasted.⁷ According to Owen, what Christ kept for us was the original Adamic covenant of works, not the Old Covenant as an end in itself. Owen says: “But in the new covenant, the very first thing that is proposed, is the accomplishment and establishment of the covenant of works, both as to its commands and sanction, in the obedience and suffering of the mediator.”⁸

Reisinger appears to make the Old Covenant the first covenant of works, something Owen clearly denies.⁹ Reisinger also appears to make the Old Covenant contain in itself the promise of *eternal* life and the threat of *eternal* condemnation, thus necessitating Christ’s obedience to it.¹⁰ Owen denies both of these ideas, saying:

This covenant [Sinai] thus made, with these ends and promises, did never save nor condemn any man eternally. All that lived under the administration of it did attain eternal life, or perished for ever, but not by virtue of this covenant as formally such. It did, indeed, revive the commanding power and sanction of the first covenant of works; and therein, as the apostle speaks, was “the ministry of condemnation,” 2 Cor. iii. 9; for “by the deeds of the law can no flesh be justified.” And on the other hand, it directed also unto the promise, which was the instrument of life and salvation unto all that did believe. But as unto what it had of its own, it was confined unto things temporal. Believers were saved under it, but not by virtue of it. Sinners perished eternally under it, but by the curse of the original law of works.¹¹

Using Owen as Reisinger does may lead some to think that Owen and Reisinger are one on the nature of the Old Covenant. But this is far from the truth. It must be granted, of course, that Owen and Reisinger agree in some aspects of the Old Covenant, though even this acknowledgement must be qualified carefully. Both teach that the Old Covenant was made with Israel, was a temporary covenant, and was abrogated by the New Covenant, though Reisinger has some inconsistencies in his position. Both teach that the Old Covenant was not merely an administration of the covenant of grace and deny the ‘one covenant two administration’ motif of other covenant theologians.¹² Both view the Decalogue as a unit as abrogated under the New

subject of Covenant Theology, Dispensationalism, and the view that I hold. Several of those who held strongly to Covenant Theology insisted on using the term covenant of grace as if it had the authority of a verse of Scripture. They made no attempt to prove their assertions from Scripture texts. They kept speaking in terms of logic and theology. I finally said, ‘We agree that the Bible is structured around two covenants. However, the two covenants that you keep talking about, namely, a covenant of works with Adam in the garden of Eden and a covenant of grace made with Adam immediately after the fall, have no textual basis in the Word of God. They are both theological covenants and not biblical covenants. They are the children of one’s theological system. Their mother is Covenant Theology and their father is logic applied to that system. Neither of these two covenants had their origin in Scripture texts and biblical exegesis. Both of them were invented by theology as the necessary consequences of a theological system.’” Though Reisinger denies the Edenic covenant of works, he does not deny the theology of the covenant of works entirely. He simply does not go back far enough in redemptive history for its basis (cf., Hos. 6:7 and Rom. 5:12ff.). Because he holds to a modified covenant of works position (i.e., the Mosaic Covenant is *the* covenant of works), Reisinger’s writings uphold the law/gospel distinction which is crucial in maintaining the gospel of justification by faith alone. For this he is to be commended.

⁶ Reisinger, *Tablets of Stone*, 37.

⁷ Owen, *Works*, 22:85, 90, 92.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22:89, 90.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22:78.

¹⁰ See Richard C. Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology* (Enumclaw, WA: WinePress Publishing, 2001), 57-59, for more statements by Reisinger which substantiate this along with my comments. In his book *Tablets of Stone*, he argues that the Old Covenant was for Israel alone and also, contradicting himself, that Christ fulfilled its terms for New Covenant Christians. Owen teaches that Christ fulfilled the terms of the Adamic covenant of works for Christians and not the Old Covenant as a covenant of works in itself.

¹¹ Owen, *Works*, 22:85-86.

¹² See *Ibid.*, 22:76, 86 and Reisinger, *Abraham’s*, 129ff.

Covenant; however, Owen does so in a relative and highly qualified manner (see below), while Reisinger does so in an absolute manner.¹³

Another NCT advocate, Tom Wells, claims that Reisinger “has adopted John Owen’s view of the Mosaic and New covenants, without adding Owen’s ‘creation ordinance’ view of the Sabbath.”¹⁴ Wells also claims that Owen held a mediating position on the relationship between the Mosaic and New Covenants and that Owen’s position is substantially that of Reisinger and hence, of NCT.¹⁵ Wells defines what he means by a mediating position when he says:

The mediating position is as follows: a law of any kind may be the property of more than one covenant, but no covenant is still in force in any way after it has reached its end. Applied to the present discussion that means this: many (indeed all) of the moral commands of the Mosaic Covenant reappear in the Law of Christ. But they do not do so because they are part of the Ten Commandments or the Mosaic Covenant. That covenant, with every one of its laws and with every demand it lays on anyone whatsoever, has passed away forever. That was John Owen’s position, and that is the position of John Reisinger. It has also been the position of many others.¹⁶

In Sinclair Ferguson’s *John Owen on the Christian Life*, cited by Wells in the Reisinger pamphlet, Ferguson also calls Owen’s position on the Old Covenant a mediating position.¹⁷ But Ferguson’s explanation of Owen’s mediating position does not have to do with the relationship between the law of the Old Covenant and the Law of Christ (as per Wells above). In fact, Ferguson does not even discuss this matter in this section of his book. Instead, Ferguson’s understanding of Owen’s mediating position has to do with the nature and function of the Old Covenant and its relation to the Adamic covenant of works, the covenant of grace, and the New Covenant. Unlike others, Owen did not believe that the Old Covenant was a covenant of works in itself or simply an administration of the covenant of grace. In Ferguson’s words:

Sinai should not then be thought of as the covenant of works; but Sinai does involve a renewal of the principles which partly constituted the covenant of works. On the other hand, the Sinai covenant cannot be thought of as the covenant of grace.¹⁸

His [Owen’s] conclusion then is that the Sinaitic covenant revived the commands, sanctions and promises of the covenant of works, and that when the apostle Paul disputes about works or law-righteousness it is the renovation of the Edenic covenant in the Sinaitic covenant he has in mind. Sinai therefore is a ‘particular, temporary covenant ... and not a mere dispensation of the covenant of grace.’¹⁹

It appears that what Wells means by Owen’s mediating position and what Ferguson means is different.²⁰ Ferguson means that Owen was midway between those who taught that the Old Covenant was the covenant of works and those who taught that it was the covenant of grace.

¹³ In Reisinger’s *Tablets of Stone*, he asserts several times and in various ways that the Tablets of Stone were given to ancient Israel, and ancient Israel alone, as a legal covenant. But, as noted above, he also claims that Christ died under the curse of and to secure the blessings of that very covenant for the New Covenant Israel of God, his church.

¹⁴ Tom Wells, *Is John G. Reisinger an Antinomian?* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2001), 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* I have added ‘hence, NCT’ because (on p. 5) Wells admits that Reisinger is part of the movement called NCT.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 28. In an email discussion concerning his view of Owen’s mediating position, Ferguson affirmed that my understanding of him (and Owen) is correct.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁰ In an email discussion and subsequent telephone conversation with Tom Wells, he affirmed that he probably intended to use the phrase with Ferguson’s meaning. After examining Wells and Ferguson, however, I believe that they, in fact, cannot mean the same thing and that Wells probably misunderstood both Ferguson and Owen.

Owen taught neither. Wells concentrates on the introduction of moral law from the Old Covenant into the New Covenant and how that is done with the Old Covenant abolished.

Using the phrase “mediating position” as Wells does may cause confusion. By using Owen’s “mediating position” (as he defines it), Wells’ attempts to clear Reisinger of accusations of doctrinal antinomianism. By referencing Ferguson (and even Ferguson’s use of the phrase “mediating position”),²¹ however, Wells allows his readers to assume that he and Ferguson mean the same thing. But this is not the case.

Owen did not view the Old Covenant merely as an administration of the covenant of grace. He did not avow the “one covenant two administrations” motif of many of his contemporaries.²² He viewed it as a distinct, subservient covenant with a limited and temporary purpose.²³ He saw within it a revival of the Edenic covenant of works,²⁴ superadded to the promises of grace.²⁵ He also viewed it as abolished by the New Covenant.²⁶ Hence, Owen’s mediating position put him between those who held that the Old Covenant was the covenant of works and those who held that it was the covenant of grace.²⁷ But his mediating position is not a forerunner to Reisinger and NCT.

In claiming that Reisinger “has adopted John Owen’s view of the Mosaic and New covenants, without adding Owen’s ‘creation ordinance’ view of the Sabbath,”²⁸ Wells leads his readers to believe that the only difference between Owen and Reisinger (and NCT) on these issues is Owen’s creation-based Sabbath position. But this is untrue. Owen and Reisinger (and NCT) do not agree on many issues related to the nature and functions of the Old Covenant.

One place where this especially is so concerns the function of the Decalogue in Owen’s thought. Wells claims that Owen and Reisinger both hold that once a covenant, and the laws attached to it, has run its course, then “that covenant, with every one of its laws and with every demand it lays on anyone whatsoever, has passed away forever.”²⁹ For Reisinger and NCT, this means that the Decalogue as a unit, including its Sabbath, has passed away forever and that if any of its laws are binding on New Covenant Christians, then they must reappear in the law of Christ.³⁰ This is the standard NCT position. But is this what Owen teaches? If Reisinger “has adopted John Owen’s view of the Mosaic and New covenants, without adding Owen’s ‘creation ordinance’ view of the Sabbath,”³¹ and Reisinger teaches that the Decalogue as a unit, along with its Sabbath, has been abrogated in all senses by the New Covenant, then we should find this teaching in Owen as well. In fact, if Wells’ claim is true, then the only way that Owen can have the Sabbath functioning under the New Covenant is either to base it solely upon its status as

²¹ Ibid., 10.

²² Owen, *Works*, 22:76, 86.

²³ Ibid., 22:76, 77, 85, 90.

²⁴ Ibid., 22:78, 80, 81, 89, 142. Geerhardus Vos acknowledges that other Reformed theologians have used similar language as Owen concerning the relationship between the covenant of works and the Sinai covenant. He says, “we can also explain why the older theologians did not always clearly distinguish between the covenant of works and the Sinaitic covenant. At Sinai it was not the ‘bare’ law that was given, but a reflection of the covenant of works *revived* [emphasis added], as it were, in the interests of the covenant of grace continued at Sinai.” See Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 255. See also Karlberg, *Covenant Theology*, 76, 184, 248, and 273.

²⁵ Ibid., 22:113, 142.

²⁶ Ibid., 22:100.

²⁷ Ferguson, *John Owen*, 28. Cf., also Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 88-109 (cf., also 173, 174) for a discussion on the various views of the nature and function of the Old Covenant among seventeenth-century divines. Bolton holds, substantially, the same position as Owen. The Old Covenant is not a covenant of works in itself, nor a ‘legal’ administration of the covenant of grace. It is a subservient covenant to the covenant of grace. Fisher and Boston held similar views.

²⁸ Wells, *Reisinger*, 6.

²⁹ Ibid., 8.

³⁰ Ibid., 8, 9.

³¹ Ibid., 6.

creation ordinance or to contradict himself. But, Owen does neither. He does not base the perpetuity of the Sabbath on its status as a creation ordinance alone, nor does he contradict himself by smuggling the Decalogue into the New Covenant against his principles.

Simply put, Wells, like Reisinger, has overstated his case. In doing so, he reveals that he misunderstands Owen on more than one front, even attributing a position to him that he did not hold. Without warrant he claims that Reisinger “has adopted Owen’s view of the Mosaic and New covenants, without adding Owen’s “creation ordinance” view of the Sabbath.”³² And he forces Owen to either base the Sabbath on creation alone or contradict himself by introducing it into the New Covenant on other grounds also, something which, in fact, Owen does repeatedly (see below).

Against this background, the remainder of this article attempts to show the following:

- (1) How Owen defined the abrogation of Old Covenant law.
- (2) That Owen, late in his writing career, taught the perpetuity of the Decalogue as a unit under the New Covenant, including its Sabbath, while adhering to his view of the abrogation of Old Covenant law.
- (3) That Owen’s interpretation and application of Matt. 5:17 preclude the elimination of the Decalogue as a unit from the New Covenant
- (4) That Owen held to the multifunctional utility of the Decalogue as expressed in the Savoy Declaration of Faith (Savoy). In this he agreed with the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (2nd LCF), and the writings of the Reformers and Post-Reformation Reformed Scholastics. In other words, Owen taught the transcovenantal utility of the Decalogue, like others before and after him.

In displaying these things, we will see that Owen’s earlier and later writings fully agree, proving that Owen did not change his views or contradict himself. We will also see that Owen stands in the mainstream of both Puritan, confessional theology and the theology of Reformation and Post-Reformation Reformed Scholasticism. And we will see that Wells and Reisinger misunderstood Owen on some very crucial points.

The Idea of Abrogation in Owen and Others

Owen teaches that the whole law of Moses (even the moral element) has been abrogated. This is the NCT position and is probably why Wells says that Reisinger holds Owen’s view. In this section, we will look at some of the statements that led Wells to conclude this. Commenting on Heb. 7:18, 19, Owen says:

I have proved before that “the commandment” in this verse [Heb. 7:18] is of equal extent and signification with “the law” in the next. And “the law” there doth evidently intend the whole law, in both the parts of it, moral and ceremonial, *as it was given by Moses unto the church of Israel* [emphasis added].³³

Commenting on Heb. 7:12, Owen says:

It was the whole “law of commandments contained in ordinances,” or the whole law of Moses, *so far as it was the rule of worship and obedience unto the church*; for that law it is that followeth the fates of the priesthood [emphasis added].³⁴

³² Ibid.

³³ Owen, *Works*, 21:464. Cited by Wells in *Reisinger*, 7.

³⁴ Owen, *Works*, 21:428. Cited by Wells in *Reisinger*, 7.

Wherefore the whole law of Moses, *as given unto the Jews*, whether as used or abused by them, was repugnant unto and inconsistent with the gospel, and the mediation of Christ, especially his priestly office, therein declared; neither did God either design, appoint, or direct that they should be co-existent [emphasis added].³⁵

Owen, of course, carefully qualifies what he means by the whole law and its abrogation. Commenting again on Heb. 7:18, 19, he says:

Nor is it the whole *ceremonial law* only that is intended by “the command” in this place, but the *moral law* also [emphasis his], *so far as it was compacted with the other into one body of precepts for the same end* [emphasis added]; for with respect unto the efficacy of the whole law of Moses, as unto our drawing nigh unto God, it is here considered.³⁶

Again, Owen says:

By all these ways was the church of the Hebrews forewarned that the time would come when the whole Mosaical law, *as to its legal or covenant efficacy*, should be disannulled, unto the unspeakable advantage of the church [emphasis added].³⁷

This comes in a section in which Owen is showing how “the whole law may be considered ...absolutely in itself” or “with respect ...unto the end for which it was given” or “unto the persons unto whom it was given.”³⁸ He calls the law “the whole system of Mosaical ordinances, as it was the covenant which God made with the people of Horeb. For the apostle takes ‘the commandment,’ and ‘the law’ for the same in this chapter; and ‘the covenant,’ in the next, for the same in them both.”³⁹ Owen is concentrating on the whole Mosaic law, i.e., it is the law in its totality as it related to God’s Old Covenant people that has been abrogated. Thus the abrogation of the law in Owen refers to the whole law as it functioned in Old Covenant Israel.⁴⁰

This understanding of abrogation is found in Calvin also. Calvin taught that the abrogation of the law under the New Covenant in no way abrogates the Decalogue in every sense of the word. Commenting on Rom. 7:2, Calvin says:

...but we must remember, that Paul refers here *only to that office of the law which was peculiar to Moses*; for as far as God has in the ten commandments taught what is just and right, and given directions for guiding our life, no abrogation of the law is to be dreamt of; for the will of God must stand the same forever. We ought carefully to remember that *this is not a release from the righteousness which is taught in the law, but from its rigid requirements, and from the curse which thence follows*. The law, then, as a rule of life, is not abrogated; but what belongs to it as opposed to the liberty obtained through Christ, that is, as it requires absolute perfection [emphasis added].⁴¹

³⁵ Owen, *Works*, 21:429. Cited by Wells in *Reisinger*, 7.

³⁶ Owen, *Works*, 21:458.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 21:469.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21:466.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21:471.

⁴⁰ I defended this view of abrogation in my *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology (IDOTD)*. “Hearty agreement must be given when New Covenant theologians argue for the abolition of the Old Covenant. This is clearly the teaching of the Old and New Testaments (see Jeremiah 31:31-32; Second Corinthians 3; Galatians 3, 4; Ephesians 2:14-15; Hebrews 8-10). The whole law of Moses, *as it functioned under the Old Covenant*, has been abolished, including the Ten Commandments. Not one jot or tittle of the law of Moses functions *as Old Covenant law* anymore and to act as if it does constitutes redemptive-historical retreat and neo-Judaizing. However, to acknowledge that the law of Moses no longer functions *as Old Covenant law* is not to accept that it no longer functions; it simply no longer functions *as Old Covenant law*. This can be seen by the fact that the New Testament teaches *both* the abrogation of the law of the Old Covenant *and* its abiding moral validity under the New Covenant.” See Barcellos, *IDOTD*, 61.

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, re. 1984), 19:246.

It is important to note that “the term ‘law’ for Calvin may mean (1) the whole religion of Moses...; (2) the special revelation of the moral law to the chosen people, i.e., chiefly the Decalogue and Jesus’ summary...; or (3) various bodies of civil, judicial, and ceremonial statutes.”⁴² Calvin says, “I understand by the word ‘law’ not only the Ten Commandments, which set forth a godly and righteous rule of living, but the form of religion handed down by God through Moses.”⁴³ Calvin views the law in various ways. So when he speaks of abrogation, he does not intend absolute abrogation, but relative abrogation in terms of the law considered not in itself, but in its redemptive-historically conditioned use. Commenting on the concept of abrogation in Calvin, one Calvin scholar said, “the Law was not in itself abrogated by the Christ, but only the slavery and malediction attaching to it under the ancient Covenant.”⁴⁴ According to Calvin, therefore, the Moral Law has not been abrogated, as such. What has been abrogated or fulfilled in Christ for believers is its function as a curse. “The law itself is not abolished for the believer, but only the *maledictio legis*... [F]or Calvin the law is related above all to believers for whom, however, the *maledictio* is removed.”⁴⁵

In his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, while discussing the extent that Christ abrogated the law and the extent that it is still in force, Zacharias Ursinus says:

The ordinary and correct answer to this question is, that the ceremonial and judicial law, as given by Moses, has been abrogated in as far as it relates to obedience; and that the moral law has also been abrogated *as it respects the curse*, but not as it respects obedience [emphasis added].⁴⁶

The moral law has, *as it respects one part*, been abrogated by Christ; *and as it respects another*, it has not [emphasis added].⁴⁷

But the moral law, or Decalogue, has not been abrogated *in as far as obedience to it is concerned*. God continually, no less now than formerly, requires both the regenerate and the unregenerate to render obedience to his law [emphasis added].⁴⁸

A similar understanding of abrogation is found in Francis Turretin. In vol. 2 of his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Turretin entitles chapter XXIII as follows:

THE ABROGATION OF THE MORAL LAW

XXIII. Whether the moral law is abrogated entirely under the New Testament. Or whether in a certain respect it still pertains to Christians. The former we deny; the latter we affirm against the Antinomians.⁴⁹

Notice Turretin’s careful qualifications (i.e., “entirely” and “in a certain respect”). While discussing the abrogation of the moral law, he says, “In order to apprehend properly the state of the question, we must ascertain in what sense the law may be said to have been abrogated and in what sense not.”⁵⁰ Then, after listing three senses in which the law has been abrogated, he says,

⁴² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II.vii, n. 1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, II.vii.1. The same phenomena of viewing the law from different theological vantage points can be found in Owen also. I will provide evidence for this below.

⁴⁴ I. John Hesselink, *Calvin’s Concept of the Law* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1992), 203.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁴⁶ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, re. n.d.), 492.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 495.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 496.

⁴⁹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 1994), 2:ix.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:141.

“But the question only concerns its directive use—whether we are now freed from the direction and observance of the law. This the adversaries maintain; we deny.”⁵¹

Turretin does what we have seen in others. He has a view of abrogation which both includes the Decalogue and does not include the Decalogue. This is because the law can be viewed from different theological and redemptive-historical vantage points.

Finally, concerning the *lex Mosaica* [law of Moses], which, representing the view of Protestant Scholasticism, he defines as the moral law as given to Israel by God in a special revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai, Richard Muller says, “As a norm of obedience belonging to the [covenant of grace], the law remains in force under the economy of the New Testament.”⁵² Muller recognizes the fact that Protestant Scholastics considered the law in different ways. Therefore, when we examine their statements about abrogation, we must take this into consideration. If we do not, we may take their statements on the abrogation of the law in an absolute manner and make them mean something they did not.

We have seen that Owen’s view of abrogation was similar to Calvin’s, Ursinus’, Turretin’s, and Protestant Scholasticism’s. With them, he carefully and repeatedly qualifies what he means by abrogation. He stands clearly within Reformed orthodoxy at this point. His view of abrogation neither necessarily demands the elimination of the Decalogue as a unit in all senses under the New Covenant, nor is it contradicted by the inclusion of the Decalogue as a unit under the New Covenant. Though with his own nuances and emphases, Owen’s view is substantially that of others in his day. It was Calvin’s, Ursinus’s, Turretin’s, Protestant Scholasticism’s, as well as that of the WCF, the Savoy, and the 2nd LCF.⁵³

It appears that Wells takes the concept of abrogation absolutely. Hence, he cannot allow the Decalogue to function in more ways than Old Covenant law, unless its individual commands reappear in the law of Christ (New Testament). This leads to its elimination from the New Covenant, which, of course, is the position of NCT. From what has been shown above, however, Wells’ understanding of Owen on abrogation is not necessary. Others held similar views and yet did not eliminate the Decalogue from the New Covenant.

From the evidence presented, Owen must be understood to view abrogation as both including and not including the Decalogue, depending on how it is viewed. If this is the case, then his understanding of abrogation, though with its own nuances and emphases, has clear and ample precedent in Calvin, Ursinus, Turretin, and Protestant Scholasticism.

The Perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant in Owen and Others

In his Hebrews commentary, Owen teaches that Jer. 31:33 and 2 Co. 3:3 refer to the Decalogue being written on the heart of New Covenant saints. Commenting on Heb. 9:5, he says:

This law, as unto the substance of it, was the only law of creation, the rule of the first covenant of works; for it contained the sum and substance of that obedience which is due unto God from all rational creatures made in his image, and nothing else. It was the whole of what God designed in our creation unto his own glory and our everlasting blessedness. What was in the tables of stone was nothing but a transcript of what was written in the heart of man originally; and which is returned thither again by the grace of the new covenant, Jeremiah 31:33; 2 Corinthians 3:3.⁵⁴

Consider these observations relevant to our subject. *First*, the law, in the context of Owen’s discussion, refers to the law contained on the tables of stone (i.e., the Decalogue). *Second*, Owen

⁵¹ Ibid., 2:141, 142.

⁵² Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 174.

⁵³ See chapters 4 and 19 of these Confessions.

⁵⁴ Owen, *Works*, 22:215.

is considering the Decalogue “as unto the substance of it” and not necessarily as to the form and/or function of it under the Old Covenant.⁵⁵ *Third*, he claims that the Decalogue “was the only law of creation, the rule of the first covenant of works.” *Fourth*, he claims that the Decalogue, as to the substance of it, “contained the sum and substance of that obedience which is due unto God from all rational creatures made in his image.” *Fifth*, he claims that “what was in the tables of stone was nothing but a transcript of what was written in the heart of man originally.” *Sixth*, he claims that “what was in the tables of stone” (and written on the heart of man at creation) is that “which is returned thither again by the grace of the new covenant.” And *finally*, he references Jer. 31:33 and 2 Co. 3:3. Owen, on this exegetical basis, clearly believed in the perpetuity (as to its substance) of the entire Decalogue under the New Covenant.

Owen continues:

Although this law as a covenant was broken and disannulled by the entrance of sin, and became insufficient as unto its first ends, of the justification and salvation of the church thereby, Rom viii. 3; yet as a law and rule of obedience it was never disannulled, nor would God suffer it to be. Yea, one principal design of God in Christ was, that it might be fulfilled and established, Matt. v. 17, 18; Rom iii. 31. For to reject this law, or to abrogate it, had been for God to have laid aside that glory of his holiness and righteousness which in his infinite wisdom he designed therein. Hence, after it was again broken by the people as a covenant, he wrote it a second time himself in tables of stone, and caused it to be safely kept in the ark, as his perpetual testimony. That, therefore, which he taught the church by and in all this, in the first place, was, that this law was to be fulfilled and accomplished, or they could have no advantage of or benefit by the covenant.⁵⁶

From this statement, the following observations also are relevant to our subject. *First*, Owen distinguishes between how the Decalogue functioned in the covenant of works and how it functions “as a law and rule of obedience.” *Second*, he connects this law with God’s holiness and righteousness. In other words, Owen views the Decalogue as a perpetual “law and rule of obedience” because it is related to God’s holiness and righteousness (i.e., his unchangeable nature).

Continuing, and concentrating on how Christ is the true ark (the antitype of the Old Covenant’s Ark of the Covenant), he says:

In his *obedience unto God* according unto the law he is the true *ark*, wherein the law was kept inviolate; that is, was fulfilled, answered, and accomplished, Matt. v. 17; Rom. viii. 3, x. 4. Hence by God’s gracious dealing with sinners, pardoning and justifying them freely, the law [i.e., Decalogue] is not disannulled, but established, Rom. iii. 31. That this was to be done, that without it no covenant between God and man could be firm and stable, was the principal design of God to declare in all this service; without the consideration thereof it was wholly insignificant. This was the original mystery of all these institutions, that in and by the obedience of the promised seed, the everlasting, unalterable law should be fulfilled.⁵⁷

Several observations are worthy of note. *First*, in the context of Owen’s discussion, the law is that which was placed in the ark (i.e., the Decalogue as written by God on stone tablets). *Second*, he

⁵⁵ Protestant Scholasticism taught that the Decalogue summarily contains the moral law and is the inscripturated form of the natural law, as to its *substance*. A distinction was made between *substance* and *form*. *Substance* is one; *form* may vary. Hence, when the Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 98 says, “The moral law is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments,” it refers to the fact that the *substance* (i.e., the underlying essence) of the Moral Law is assumed and articulated in the propositions of the Decalogue as contained in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. The *form* fits the redemptive-historical circumstances in which it was given. The *substance* or underlying principles are always relevant and applicable to man. The application may shift based on redemptive-historical changes, such as the inauguration of the New Covenant, but its *substance* and utility never changes.

⁵⁶ Owen, *Works*, 22:215, 216.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 22:217, 218.

says that this law was fulfilled, answered, and accomplished by Christ. *Third*, he says that the obedience of Christ to this law effects our justification. *Fourth*, he says that the law is not disannulled but established. *Fifth*, he teaches that all of this was typified in the Ark of the Covenant. And *finally*, he says that the law is *everlasting* and *unalterable*, probably due to its reflection of God's holiness and righteousness.⁵⁸

Owen's use of Jer. 31:33 and 2 Co. 3:3 was not novel. Others who held to his basic understanding of abrogation argued for the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant on the same exegetical grounds.⁵⁹

In his *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, while discussing the reason that God "engraved them [Ten Commandments] with his own finger,"⁶⁰ Herman Witsius says:

Both because they contained the declaration or testimony of the divine will, and because the preservation of them by the Israelites, was a testimony of the law given to, and received by them at Sinai. This writing also signified the purpose of God, to write the law on the hearts of his elect, according to the promise of the covenant of grace, Jer. xxxi. 33.

Nor is it for nothing that God himself would be the author of this writing, without making use of any man or angel. For this is the meaning of the Holy Spirit, when he says, that the tablets were written with the finger of God, Exod. xxxi. 18. and that the writing was the writing of God, Exod. xxxii. 16. The reasons were, 1st. To set forth the pre-eminence of this law, which he permitted to be written by Moses. 2^{dly}. To intimate, that it is the work of God alone, to write the law on the heart, which is what neither man himself, nor the ministers of God can do, but the Spirit of God alone. And thus believers are "the epistle of Christ, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God," 2 Cor. iii. 3.⁶¹

Witsius goes on to discuss the effects of God's grace, saying, "But the grace of God will cancel that writing of sin, and in the room of it, will the graver of his most Holy Spirit, engrave on the same table of our heart the characters of his law."⁶²

The context is clear. Witsius sees Jer. 31:33 and 2 Co. 3:3 as testimonies to the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant. As shown above, Owen used these texts in a very similar context and with the same practical result.

Turretin also references both Jer. 31:33 and 2 Cor. 3:3. His use of these texts corresponds with Owen's and Witsius' use, at least to a degree. While discussing how the abrogation of the Moral Law (the Decalogue) is not to be considered absolutely, but relatively, he says,

It is one thing to be under the law as a covenant to acquire life by it (as Adam was) or as a schoolmaster and a prison to guard men until the advent of Christ; another to be under the law as a rule of life to regulate our morals piously and holily.⁶³

The law is compared by Paul to "a dead husband" (Rom. 7:2, 3), not simply, but relatively with regard to the sway and rigorous dominion it obtained over us and the curse to which it subjected sinners; but not with regard to liberation from the duty to be performed to it. Thus the law threatening, compelling, condemning, is not "made for a righteous man" (1 Tim. 1:9) because he

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 22:215.

⁵⁹ In *IDOTD*, I provided exegetical evidence that Jer. 31:33 and 2 Co. 3:3 speak directly to the issue of the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant. I provided references to Old Testament and New Testament scholars to this end. The scholars I referenced are not all Reformed confessionalsists. I did this on purpose to show that one's confessional commitments do not necessarily cloud one's exegetical lenses. See Barcellos, *IDOTD*, 16-24 and 34-38.

⁶⁰ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, re. 1990), 2:170.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2:170, 171.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 2:171.

⁶³ Turretin, 2:143.

is impelled of his own accord to duty and is no longer influenced by the spirit of bondage and the fear of punishment (Rom. 8:15; Ps. 110:3), but the law directive and regulative of morals is always laid down for him and he ought to be under it.⁶⁴

What was given to the Jews as Jews can be for the use of the Jews alone; but what is given to the Jews as covenanted (or as the people of God simply) does not refer to them alone, but to all those who hold the same relation of people of God.⁶⁵

Turretin says many more similar things. Suffice to say that he makes distinctions in the way the law is viewed. This is done to protect the Moral Law from an absolutist view of abrogation and to promote its perpetual utility. It is in this context that Turretin says, “‘If ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law’ (Gal. 5:18, viz., compelling and cursing), but under it directing, inasmuch as the Spirit works that law upon our hearts (2 Cor. 3:2; Jer. 31:33).”⁶⁶ In this context, the law which directs is the Moral Law (Decalogue). Hence, it is the Decalogue which “the Spirit works upon our hearts.”

Thomas Boston’s notes to *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* reveal that at least one 18th century Reformed theologian held that Jer. 31:33 referred to the writing of the Decalogue on the heart under the New Covenant. Boston says:

One will not think it strange to hear, that the ten commandments were, as it were, razed out of man’s heart by the fall, if one considers the spirituality and vast extent of them, and that they were, in their perfection engraven on the heart of man, in his creation, and doth withal take notice of the ruin brought on man by the fall. Hereby he indeed lost the very knowledge of the law of nature, if the ten commandments are to be reckoned, as certainly they are, the substance and matter of that law; although he lost it not totally, but some remains thereof were left with him. Concerning these the apostle speaks, Rom. i. 19, 20; and ii. 14, 15. And our author teaches expressly, that the law is partly known by nature, that is, in its corrupt state, See page 181. And here he says, not simply, that the ten commandments were razed, though in another case (page 44), he speaks after that manner, where yet it is evident he means not a razing quite; but he says, “They were, as it were, razed.” But what are these remains of them in comparison with that body of natural laws, fairly written, and deeply engraven, on the heart of innocent Adam? If they were not, as it were, razed, what need is there of writing a new copy of them in the hearts of the elect, according to the promise of the new covenant? “I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them,” Heb. x. 16, and viii. 10; Jer. xxxi. 33.⁶⁷

Like Witsius and Turretin before him, Boston proves that there were some in the 17th and 18th centuries who argued for the perpetuity of the Decalogue from Jer. 31:33 (and 2 Co. 3:3), i.e., on the same exegetical ground as Owen.

Though Owen’s statements concerning Jer. 31:33 are not all equally clear, those provided above are clear enough to conclude that he used it and 2 Co. 3:3 in a context which argues for the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant. He does this in similar fashion as Witsius, Turretin, and Boston.

We have seen that abrogation in Owen and others is not absolute. We have also seen that he did, in fact, reference Jer. 31:33 and 2 Co. 3:3 in a context arguing for the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant. He did both of these things in a manner done by others before and after him.

The statements of Owen examined thus far came toward the end of his life. Tom Wells rightly claims that the Hebrews commentary reflects Owen’s “mature thoughts on the

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 2:145.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 2:143, 144.

⁶⁷ Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, re. 1991), 177.

covenants.”⁶⁸ But Owen’s mature thoughts on the covenants include the perpetuity of the entire Decalogue, including the Sabbath commandment, under the New Covenant. Wells claims that Reisinger “has adopted John Owen’s view of the Mosaic and New covenants, without adding Owen’s ‘creation ordinance’ view of the Sabbath.”⁶⁹ But from our study thus far, we have seen that Owen taught the perpetuity of the Decalogue as a unit under the New Covenant. Hence, Owen did not base the Sabbath under the New Covenant solely upon its status as creation ordinance. Wells’ claim, therefore, needs modification and qualification in light of a proper understanding of Owen on the Mosaic and New Covenants.

Matthew 5:17 and the Perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant in Owen and Others

In his Hebrews commentary, Owen argues for the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant from Matt. 5:17. While discussing the foundations of the Sabbath, he says:

From these particular instances we may return to the consideration of the law of the decalogue in general, and the perpetual power of exacting obedience wherewith it is accompanied. That in the Old Testament it is frequently declared to be universally obligatory, and has the same efficacy ascribed unto it, without putting in any exceptions to any of its commands or limitations of its number, I suppose will be granted. The authority of it is no less fully asserted in the New Testament, and that also absolutely without distinction, or the least intimation of excepting the fourth command from what is affirmed concerning the whole. It is of the law of the decalogue that our Savior treats, Matt. v. 17-19. This he affirms that he came not to dissolve, as he did the ceremonial law, but to fulfill it; and then affirms that not one jot or tittle of it shall pass away. And making thereon a distribution of the whole into its several commands, he declares his disapprobation of them who shall break, or teach men to break, any one of them. And men make bold with him, when they so confidently assert that they may break one of them, and teach others so to do, without offense. That this reaches not to the confirmation of the seventh day precisely, we shall after-wards abundantly demonstrate.⁷⁰

Commenting on Heb. 9:3-5, Owen says:

Although this law as a covenant was broken and disannulled *by the entrance of sin*, and became insufficient as unto its first ends, of the justification and salvation of the church thereby, Rom. viii. 3; yet as a *law and rule of obedience* it was never disannulled, nor would God suffer it to be. Yea, one principal design of God in Christ was, that it might be fulfilled and established, Matt. v. 17, 18; Rom. iii. 31. For to reject this law, or to abrogate it, had been for God to have laid aside that glory of his holiness and righteousness which in his infinite wisdom he designed therein. Hence, after it was again broken by the people as a covenant, he wrote it a second time himself in tables of stone, and caused it to be safely kept in the ark, as his perpetual testimony. That, therefore, which he taught the church by and in all this, in the first place, was, that this law was to be fulfilled and accomplished, or they could have no advantage of or benefit by the covenant.⁷¹

This understanding of Matt. 5:17, which includes the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant, does not necessarily contradict Owen’s view of the abrogation of the whole law—the Decalogue included. We have seen that abrogation for Owen is not absolute, especially when it

⁶⁸ Wells, *Reisinger*, 17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁰ Owen, *Works*, 23:372.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 22:215, 216.

comes to the Decalogue. Owen used Jer. 31:33 and 2 Co. 3:3 as proof of the perpetuity of the Decalogue. His use of Matt. 5:17 is to the same end.⁷²

While discussing how abrogation affects the Moral Law, Ursinus makes the point that “the moral law, or Decalogue, has not been abrogated in as far as obedience to it is concerned.”⁷³ He then argues, “God continually, no less now than formerly, requires both the regenerate and the unregenerate to render obedience to his law.”⁷⁴ As one of the reasons that he offers in proof of this proposition, he says,

From the testimony of Scripture: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.” (Matt. 5:17.) This is spoken, indeed, of the whole law, but with a special reference to the moral law, which Christ has fulfilled in four respects ...⁷⁵

Ursinus understands Matt. 5:17 in such a way as to demand the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant. This shows that someone who held similar views with Owen on abrogation also upheld the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant from Matt. 5:17.

While offering “Proof that the law is not abrogated as to direction,”⁷⁶ Turretin says, “Christ ‘did not come to destroy but to fulfill the law’ (Mt. 5:17). Therefore as it was not abolished but fulfilled by Christ, neither is its use among us to be abolished.”⁷⁷ Once again, one who held similar views with Owen concerning abrogation and the use of Jer. 31:33 and 2 Co. 3:3 uses Matt. 5:17 to support the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant.

It is now clear that Owen’s view of Matt. 5:17 (shared by Ursinus and Turretin) does not require the elimination of the Decalogue under the New Covenant. Taking all that we have seen thus far, it is becoming more and more unlikely that Owen’s “mediating position” can be claimed as that of Reisinger or NCT. They hold to his view in part, but not in whole, and the difference is not as simple as Owen’s addition of the Sabbath as a creation ordinance.

The Multi-functional Utility of the Decalogue in Owen and Others

Owen viewed the Decalogue as having more than one function. Unlike Reisinger and NCT, he did not view it as Old Covenant law alone. His understanding of the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue can be seen clearly in several places of his Hebrews commentary. For instance, commenting on Heb. 9:5 (referenced above), he says, “The law [the Decalogue], as unto the substance of it, was the only law of creation, the rule of the first covenant of works.”⁷⁸ Later he claims that “what was in the tables of stone was nothing but a transcript of what was written in the heart of man originally; and which is returned thither again by the grace of the new covenant.”⁷⁹ Notice that he views the Decalogue as functioning several ways; *first*, “as unto the substance of it, ...the only law of creation”; *second*, “the rule of the first covenant of works”; *third*, that which “was in the tables of stone”; *fourth*, “a transcript of what was written in the heart

⁷² In *IDOTD*, I argued that Matt. 5:17 can be understood in such a way as not to eliminate the Decalogue from the New Covenant. As a matter of fact, I argued that it could be understood in such a way as not to eliminate the Old Testament from the New Covenant. For instance, after providing exegetical observations and conclusions and then testing my interpretation with the rest of the New Testament, I said: “The law of God, even the whole Old Testament, has its place under Christ, finding its realization in Him and its modified application in His kingdom. If the whole of the Old Testament is still binding, then certainly all its parts are as well.” See Barcellos, *IDOTD*, 65. I realize my explanation has nuances Owen’s may not.

⁷³ Ursinus, *Commentary*, 496.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:142.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Owen, *Works*, 22:215.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

of man originally”; and *fifth*, that “which is returned [to the heart of man] again by the grace of the new covenant.”

Commenting on Heb. 7:18, 19 (also referenced previously), he says:

Nor is it the whole *ceremonial law* only that is intended by “the command” in this place, but the *moral law* also [emphasis his], *so far as it was compacted with the other into one body of precepts for the same end* [emphasis added]; for with respect unto the efficacy of the whole law of Moses, as unto our drawing nigh unto God, it is here considered.⁸⁰

Here he views the Decalogue as a unit “so far as it was compacted with the other [ceremonial law] into one body of precepts for the same end.” In other words, he is considering the Decalogue not absolutely or in itself (see below), but relatively or as it was ‘compacted’ with the ceremonial law under the Old Covenant.

While discussing the causes of the Sabbath and arguing for the morality and immutability of the essence of the fourth commandment, he makes this statement concerning the nature and function of the Decalogue under the Old Covenant:

The nature of the decalogue, and the distinction of its precepts from all commands, ceremonial or political, comes now under consideration. The whole decalogue, I acknowledge, as given on mount Sinai to the Israelites, had a political use, as being made the principal instrument or rule of the polity and government of their nation, as peculiarly under the rule of God. It had a place also in that economy or dispensation of the covenant which that church was then brought under; wherein, by God’s dealing with them and instructing of them, they were taught to look out after a further and greater good in the promise than they were yet come to the enjoyment of. Hence the Decalogue itself, in that dispensation of it, was a schoolmaster unto Christ.⁸¹

First, Owen views the Decalogue as the core of the law of the Old Covenant. He says, “The whole decalogue, ... as given on mount Sinai to the Israelites, had a political use, as being made the principal instrument or rule of the polity and government of their nation.” *Second*, he makes the point that the Decalogue was “made the principal instrument or rule of the polity and government” of Israel under the Old Covenant. This is something that it was not until that time. He viewed it as already in existence, though in a different form and revealed in a different manner, but now being “made” something it was not. It was now “made” to fit the redemptive-historical conditions of the Old Covenant. This seems even more likely, since he goes on to say, “Some, indeed, of the precepts of it, as the first, fourth, and fifth, have either prefaces, enlargements, or additions, which belonged peculiarly to the then present and future state of that church in the land of Canaan.”⁸² *Third*, he also viewed it as “a schoolmaster unto Christ.”

Next, speaking of the Decalogue “in itself, and materially,” he says:

But in itself, and materially considered, it was wholly, and in all the preceptive parts of it, absolutely moral. Some, indeed, of the precepts of it, as the first, fourth, and fifth, have either prefaces, enlargements, or additions, which belonged peculiarly to the then present and future state of that church in the land of Canaan; but these especial applications of it unto them change not the nature of its commands or precepts, which are all moral, and, as far as they are esteemed to belong to the Decalogue, are unquestionably acknowledged so to be.⁸³

Notice that he has transitioned from viewing the Decalogue in its Old Covenant functions to viewing the Decalogue in itself. We might say that he was considering it relatively speaking, as it

⁸⁰ Ibid., 21:458.

⁸¹ Ibid., 18:365, 366.

⁸² Ibid., 18:366.

⁸³ Ibid.

functioned under the Old Covenant, but now he is considering it absolutely (or “in itself”), as it functions transcovenantally. *First*, he distinguishes between the Decalogue “as being made the principal instrument or rule of the polity and government of their [Old Covenant Israel’s] nation” and “in itself.” Hence, “in itself” and “in all the preceptive parts of it,” the Decalogue is “absolutely moral.” *Second*, he says that the Decalogue under the Old Covenant had redemptive-historical “prefaces, enlargements, or additions” peculiar to the conditions in which they [the church in the land of Canaan] lived. These are positive, covenantal appendages, added to the Decalogue and applicable to Old Covenant Israel in the land of Canaan.

From these statements, the following observations are relevant to our purpose. *First*, Owen viewed the Decalogue both relatively and absolutely, depending on its function in redemptive history. *Second*, he viewed the Decalogue (i.e., that which “was in tables of stone... as unto the substance of it”) functioning various ways and in all of the epochs of redemptive history. First of all, he saw it functioning in the Garden of Eden. He regarded it as the law of creation, the rule of the Adamic covenant of works, and the law that was written on Adam’s heart. He then saw it functioning in a special manner under the Old Covenant. He also saw it functioning under the New Covenant. He taught that it was this same law, as unto its substance, “which is returned thither [to the heart of man] again by the grace of the new covenant.”⁸⁴ He also viewed it as the rule of life for all men,⁸⁵ because “in all the preceptive parts of it” it is “absolutely moral.” And as stated earlier, he viewed it as related to the active and passive obedience of Christ and hence, connected and essential to the doctrine of justification.⁸⁶

Hence, Owen believed in the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue. It functioned in the garden as the law of creation written on Adam’s heart, as the rule of the covenant of works, as that which is required of all image bearers, as the principal instrument or rule of the Old Covenant, and as the basic rule of life under the New Covenant. Hence, its broken commands were the cause of Christ’s suffering and its precepts the rule of His obedience.⁸⁷

In many places Calvin clearly identified the Decalogue as a special form of the Natural Law.⁸⁸ For instance, Calvin said, “Now that inward law, which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables.”⁸⁹ Calvin “saw the revealed law as given in the ten commandments as a specially accommodated restatement of the law of nature for the Jews.”⁹⁰ He

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 22:215.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 22:89, 90. “But in the new covenant, the very first thing that is proposed, is the accomplishment and establishment of the covenant of works, both as to its commands and sanction, in the obedience and suffering of the mediator.”

⁸⁷ In *IDOTD*, I argued for a multi-functional utility of the Decalogue. For instance, I said: “In light of the exposition above [Jer. 31:33; 2 Cor. 3:3; Eph. 6:2-3; and 1 Tm. 1:8-11], we may assert that the Decalogue functions three ways in Scripture: *first* as the basic, fundamental law of the Old Covenant; *second*, as the basic, fundamental law of the New Covenant; and *third*, as the basic, fundamental law common to all men, the Moral Law.” See Barcellos, *IDOTD*, 59. Elsewhere, I use the language ‘transcovenantal utility’ to refer to the same concept. In other words, the Decalogue has more than one function. It is transcovenantal and applies to all men at all times, though not always in the same way. In the article “The Death of the Decalogue,” I added these observations which comport with Owen. “The essence of righteousness in man is the same from Creation to consummation. The righteousness demanded of Adam is essentially the same demanded of us. The righteousness procured by Christ’s life (His active obedience) and imputed to believers is the same for all the elect. NCT unwittingly tampers with what constitutes essential righteousness in man. This is so because NCT sees the moral law as a dynamic concept in Scripture and therefore in process, both changing and advancing as revelation unfolds. This impinges upon the active obedience of Christ, the imputation of righteousness, and the ground of justification. The Bible teaches one justification based on one righteousness, not various levels of righteousness depending on what moral law one is under.” See Richard C. Barcellos, “The Death of the Decalogue,” *Tabletalk* (Orlando: Ligonier Ministries, September 2002), 55.

⁸⁸ Some of the following material comes from Barcellos, *IDOTD*, 92, 93, and is used with permission from Founders Press.

⁸⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.viii.1.

⁹⁰ Hesselink, *Calvin’s Concept*, 51.

clearly held that by nature Gentiles without special revelation possessed the general knowledge of the Decalogue, though that knowledge is obscured by sin.⁹¹ Hesselink says, “There is no denying that for Calvin the content of the moral law is essentially the same as that inscribed on the hearts of humans ‘by nature’.”⁹² Wendel says, “One can even say that, for Calvin, the Decalogue is only a special application of the natural law which God came to attest and confirm.”⁹³

Calvin’s view of the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue is no secret. It is also evidenced by the fact that he clearly upheld the perpetuity of both tables of the law for New Covenant believers.⁹⁴ For instance, he says:

The whole law is contained under two heads. Yet our God, to remove all possibility of excuse, willed to set forth more fully and clearly by the Ten Commandments everything connected with the honor, fear, and love of him, and everything pertaining to the love toward men, which he for his own sake enjoins upon us.⁹⁵

Calvin clearly held that the Decalogue, all Ten Commandments, functioned as the basic, fundamental law of the Bible and as a universal ethical canon for all men based on creation. He also believed in the basic centrality of the entire Decalogue under the New Covenant. Similar to Owen, Calvin holds to the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue.

As stated above, in his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, while discussing the question “To What Extent Has Christ Abrogated The Law, And To What Extent Is It Still In Force,” Ursinus says, “The moral law has, as it respects one part, been abrogated by Christ; and as it respects another, it has not.”⁹⁶ He continues, “But the moral law, or Decalogue, has not been abrogated in as far as obedience to it is concerned.”⁹⁷ Ursinus, like Owen and Calvin, holds to a multi-functional utility of the Decalogue.

While discussing the use of the Moral Law, Turretin says:

A twofold use of the law may be laid down—absolute and relative. The former regards the law in itself; the latter regards the law in relation to the various states of man. The absolute (which obtains in every state of man) is that it may be a unique, full and certain rule of things to be done and avoided by each of us as well towards God as his neighbor. Thus there is no work truly and properly good and acceptable to God which does not agree with the law and is not prescribed by it; and whatsoever is not commanded nor forbidden by it is to be considered in its own nature indifferent and left to the freedom of man, unless this freedom has been restricted by some positive law.⁹⁸

In Turretin, the Moral Law or Decalogue is the inscripturated form of the Natural Law.⁹⁹ Notice that Turretin views the Moral Law absolutely and relatively. Viewing it absolutely, it is applicable “in every state of man.” How does he view the Moral Law relatively? He continues:

The relative use is manifold according to the different states of man. (1) In the instituted state of innocence, it was a contract of a covenant of works entered into with man and the means of obtaining life and happiness according to the promise added to the law...

⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.viii.1.

⁹² Hesselink, *Calvin’s Concept*, 10.

⁹³ Francois Wendel, *Calvin, Origins and Developments of His Religious Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, re. 1997), 206.

⁹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.vii.13.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, II.viii.12.

⁹⁶ Ursinus, *Commentary*, 495.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 496.

⁹⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:137.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:6, 7.

(2) In the destitute state of sin, the use of the law cannot be “justification” because it was weak in the flesh. ...Still there is a threefold use of the law [in man’s destitute state of sin]. (a) For conviction... (b) For restraint... (c) For condemnation...

(3) In the restored state of grace, it has a varied use with respect to the elect, both before and after their conversions. Antecedently, it serves (a) to convince and humble man... (b) To lead men to Christ...

It not only antecedently prepares the elect man for Christ, but consequently also directs him already renewed through Christ in the ways of the Lord; serving him as a standard and rule of the most perfect life...¹⁰⁰

Relatively, or considering the law in its relation ‘to the different states of man,’ the law has various functions as it pertains to the lost and the saved throughout all ages. In other words, there is a multi-functional utility to the law. Its utility transcends covenantal bounds. Due to the nature of the Decalogue, it cannot be eliminated from any era of redemptive history, which includes the New Covenant era. Turretin’s view is that of Owen, Calvin, and Ursinus.

Richard Muller defines Moral Law in Protestant scholastic thought as follows:

[S]pecifically and predominantly, the *Decalogus*, or Ten Commandments; also called the *lex Mosaica* ..., as distinct from the *lex ceremonialis* ...and the *lex civilis*, or civil law. The *lex moralis*, which is primarily intended to regulate morals, is known to the *synderesis* [the innate habit of understanding basic principles of moral law] and is the basis of the acts of *conscientia* [conscience—the application of the innate habit above]. In substance, the *lex moralis* is identical with the *lex naturalis* ...but, unlike the natural law, it is given by revelation in a form which is clearer and fuller than that otherwise known to the reason.¹⁰¹

While defining the Mosaic Law, he says:

...the moral law or *lex moralis* (q.v.) given to Israel by God in a special revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai. In contrast to the moral law known in an obscure way to all rational creatures, the *lex Mosaica* is the clear, complete, and perfect rule of human conduct. The Protestant scholastics argue its completeness and perfection from its fulfillment, without addition, by Christ. Since the law does promise life in return for obedience, the Reformed argue that in one sense it holds forth the abrogated *foedus operum* (q.v.), or covenant of works, if only as the unattainable promise of the righteous God and the now humanly unattainable requirement for salvation apart from grace. In addition, the Reformed can argue that Christ’s perfect obedience did fulfill the covenant of works and render Christ capable of replacing Adam as federal head of humanity. Primarily, however, the Reformed view the law as belonging to the Old Testament *dispensatio* (q.v.) of the *foedus gratiae* (q.v.), or covenant of grace. It is the norm of obedience given to God’s faithful people to be followed by them with the help of grace. As a norm of obedience belonging to the *foedus gratiae*, the law remains in force under the economy of the New Testament. Lutheran orthodoxy, which does not follow the covenant schema typical of the Reformed, also views the law as the perfect standard of righteousness and the absolute norm of morals, which requires conformity both in outward conduct and inward obedience of mind, will, and affections.¹⁰²

These definitions of key theological terms and concepts used by Protestant Scholasticism amply display that it held to the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue.

Owen’s view of the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue comports with his view of abrogation, Jer. 31:33, 2 Co. 3:3, and Matt. 5:17, and also with many of his theological contemporaries. There is a way to understand Owen on abrogation which both eliminates the Decalogue from the New Covenant and preserves it. Relatively speaking, as the Decalogue

¹⁰⁰Ibid, 2:138-140.

¹⁰¹ Muller, *Dictionary*, 173, 174.

¹⁰² Ibid., 174.

functioned under the Old Covenant, it has been abrogated. Absolutely speaking, as the Decalogue represents and summarily comprehends the Moral Law as to its substance, it has not and cannot be abrogated. It has more than one function.

Wells' theory that John Reisinger and NCT have adopted Owen's view of the Mosaic and New Covenants becomes more and more suspect as the evidence mounts.

Concluding Thoughts

Tom Wells made two claims that gave rise to this discussion: (1) that John Reisinger "has adopted John Owen's view of the Mosaic and New covenants, without adding Owen's 'creation ordinance' view of the Sabbath"¹⁰³ and (2) that Owen held a mediating position on the relationship between the Mosaic and New Covenants, a position substantially that of Reisinger and NCT.¹⁰⁴ What can we conclude in light of the evidence presented?

1. Owen and the Importance of Historical/Theological Context

- **Owen in the context of his own writings**

Primary source documentation of Owen has been presented on (1) abrogation, (2) the perpetuity of the entire Decalogue from Jer. 31:33 and 2 Co. 3:3, (3) Matt. 5:17 as it relates to the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant, and (4) the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue. Examining Owen on these subjects put us both into the primary documents themselves and within Owen's systematic thought on relevant theological issues. This was necessary in order to understand him on the primary issue under investigation—whether or not Wells' claims can be justified from Owen.

Ample evidence has been supplied to make the following conclusions concerning Owen and NCT. His view of abrogation must be carefully qualified, especially as it relates to the Decalogue and the New Covenant. On the one hand, he viewed the Decalogue as abrogated under the New Covenant, something properly and emphatically affirmed by NCT. But he viewed it abrogated in terms of its function under the Old Covenant and along with the rest of the Old Covenant's law. His view of the abrogation of the Decalogue was not absolute, contrary to NCT, but relative. It concerned a specific redemptive-historical function of the Decalogue and not all redemptive-historical functions.

On the other hand, Owen did not view the Decalogue as abrogated under the New Covenant, something emphatically claimed by NCT. He viewed it as perpetual because it contains "the sum and substance of that obedience which is due unto God from all rational creatures made in his image."¹⁰⁵

These distinctions in his views on abrogation and the various redemptive-historical functions of the Decalogue are in his early and later statements in the Hebrews commentary. It may be difficult for us to understand them, taking them at face value, but once his careful qualifications are taken into account, along with his clear assertions concerning the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant and the grounds for it, his meaning comes clearly into focus. But if we import into Owen our understanding of what certain statements mean or fail to understand his systematic thought, we are apt to misread him and either force on him something he never intended or force him to contradict himself.

It appears that Wells has misunderstood Owen. Wells' claims give the impression that he may not have taken all of the relevant data into consideration. This caused him to claim that the mediating position of Owen was that of Reisinger and NCT, without Owen's creation ordinance

¹⁰³ Wells, *Reisinger*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Owen, *Works*, 22:215.

view of the Sabbath. We have seen, however, that this is an overstatement in need of numerous crucial qualifications. And these qualifications would actually reveal the fact that Owen and NCT are farther apart on these matters than a *prima facie* approach may indicate.

- **The historical/theological context in which Owen wrote**

Primary source documentation has been presented from Calvin, Ursinus, Witsius, Turretin, Protestant Scholastic thought, and Boston. In doing so, the attempt was made to put Owen in historical and theological context. We found that his views on the matters examined were not novel and fit within the theological nomenclature of his contemporaries. Though what he said may be hard to understand and even appear novel to us, it was not so in his day. Owen's statements, put under the microscope of his theological peers, do not warrant Wells' assessment of him—that his mediating position is substantially that of John Reisinger and NCT.

2. The Contemporary/Theological Issues which gave rise to this Discussion

When understood in context, with Owen's own qualifications, and in light of his statements on related matters, and in light of the historical/theological nomenclature of his day, Owen can be understood to teach the same thing throughout the Hebrews commentary about the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant. His views were somewhat standard in his day, though with their own nuances. They were neither novel nor those of NCT.

Wells' claims have been referenced throughout this discussion and proven wrong, or at least in need of crucial qualifications. What are those qualifications? Here is a suggested list of agreements between John Owen and NCT and some necessary qualifications:

- (1) Both Owen and NCT believe that “the first covenant” in the book of Hebrews is a reference to the Old or Mosaic Covenant.
- (2) Both Owen and NCT believe that the Old Covenant was a distinct and temporary covenant for Israel in the land of Canaan, abolished by Christ and replaced by the New Covenant. But Owen did not believe that Christ fulfilled the terms of the Old Covenant *in itself* for believers; NCT, at least Reisinger, does believe this.
- (3) Both Owen and NCT believe that the Old Covenant was not merely an administration of the covenant of grace. But Owen believes it was not a covenant of works *in itself* but revived the original Adamic covenant of works; NCT, at least Reisinger, believes it was a covenant of works *in itself*.
- (4) Both Owen and NCT believe that the Bible contains a legal covenant or covenant of works. But Owen equates this covenant with the Adamic economy; NCT, at least Reisinger, equates it with the Old Covenant.
- (5) Both Owen and NCT believe that the New Covenant is an effectual covenant, securing all of the promised blessings of it for all in the covenant.¹⁰⁶
- (6) Both Owen and NCT believe in the abrogation of the Decalogue under the New Covenant. But Owen believes in it relatively, as it was “compact” with the rest of the Old Covenant's law; NCT believes in its abrogation absolutely.
- (7) Owen believes in the multi-functional utility of the entire Decalogue; NCT does not.

¹⁰⁶ In Owen, *Works*, 22:116, Owen says: “There is ascribed unto this covenant such an *efficacy of grace*, as nothing but almighty power can make good and accomplish. ...But this covenant is of that nature, as that the grace administered in it shall effectually preserve all the covenanters unto the end, and secure unto them all the benefits of it.” In *Ibid.*, 22:118, Owen says: “For all those with whom this covenant is made shall as really have the law of God written in their hearts, and their sins pardoned, according unto the promise of it, as the people of old were brought into the land of Canaan by virtue of the covenant made with Abraham. ...The covenant of grace in Christ is made only with the Israel of God, the church of the elect.—For by the making of this covenant with any, the effectual communication of the grace of it unto them is principally intended. Nor can that covenant be said to be made absolutely with any but those whose sins are pardoned by virtue thereof, and in whose hearts the law of God is written; which are the express promises of it.” In *Ibid.*, 22:147, he says: “And therefore all with whom this covenant is made are effectually sanctified, justified, and saved.” See also *Ibid.*, 22:127, 131, 132, 133, 135, 138, 150, 167, 168, 169, and 170.

- (8) Owen believes that the New Covenant includes the perpetuity of the Sabbath and not just because the Sabbath is a creation ordinance; NCT does not. In fact, as we have seen above, Wells claims that the only difference between Owen and Reisinger (and NCT) on the Mosaic and New Covenants is Owen's creation ordinance view of the Sabbath. This, indeed, is not the case and an oversimplification of Owen's view.

When Owen and NCT are examined side by side, they appear to be farther apart on these matters than a surface approach may reveal.

In the section that presents Wells' understanding of Owen's mediating position, he says:

Why, then, has the negative term antinomian stuck to so many who take this to be the best explanation of the presence of OT laws under the New Covenant? [I take "this" to refer to Wells' previous statement concerning his understanding of Owen's mediating position: "a law of any kind may be the property of more than one covenant, but no covenant is still in force in any way after it has reached its end."]

If the answer is that this is essentially an antinomian explanation, two replies seem obvious. First, if it is antinomianism in John Reisinger it is also antinomianism in John Owen. Second, it does not fall under the strictures against antinomianism in the latest volume to deal extensively with that issue, *The Weakness of the Law* by Jonathan Bayes, though Mr. Bayes himself holds the "orthodox" Puritan position.¹⁰⁷

Understanding Owen's mediating position as he does, Wells argues that if one wants to label John Reisinger an antinomian¹⁰⁸, then John Owen must be also. We have, however, seen that Owen's views are somewhat standard concerning abrogation, Jer. 31:33, 2 Co. 3:3, Matt. 5:17, and the multi-functional utility of the Decalogue. Assuming Wells' interpretation of Owen, and that Owen's views were somewhat standard (something proved above), we would then be forced to label Calvin, Ursinus, Witsius, Turretin, and Boston as antinomians, since they held substantially to what Owen did. This would be interesting, especially since those men wrote against antinomianism in its various forms. This would mean either they all changed their views or they contradicted themselves.

The evidence above, however, provides a better solution. Owen cannot be labeled as an antinomian in any sense because he did not abrogate the Moral Law (Decalogue as a unit) in all senses from the New Covenant. In other words, he did not deny the third use of the law (as a rule of life for believers) as traditionally understood in Reformed theology. NCT does deny this use and, hence, is doctrinally antinomian.¹⁰⁹

Owen's "each covenant has its own positive law" motif (i.e., Wells' understanding of Owen's mediating position) is adhered to by NCT, though applied differently. It appears that NCT uses this motif to eliminate the Decalogue (especially the fourth commandment) as a unit. Owen's

¹⁰⁷ Wells, *Reisinger*, 9.

¹⁰⁸ I prefer the phrase "doctrinal antinomian" which I define below.

¹⁰⁹ Historically, antinomians have been labeled differently, depending on the type of antinomianism adhered to. Practical antinomians not only teach against law in the Christian life, they also advocate lawless living. Doctrinal antinomians, however, do not advocate lawless living, but they deny the third use of the law or, at best, advocate it, but redefine what law means. See Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:141ff. where he discusses the fact that antinomians deny the third use of the law. See Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976, second printing, February 1983), 22 (n.32), 24, 25, for evidence that those who denied the perpetuity of the Decalogue and, hence, the third use of the law, were labeled as moderately antinomian or doctrinally antinomian, even though considered otherwise virtuous. See also Jonathan F. Bayes, *The Weakness of the Law* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2000), 44-46, where he discusses John G. Reisinger in the context of doctrinal antinomianism, my article "The Death of the Decalogue," *Tabletalk*, September 2002, which is a brief discussion of the doctrinal antinomianism of NCT, my review of *New Covenant Theology* by Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel in *Reformed Baptist Theological Review*, I:1, January 2004, and Ian McNaughton, "Antinomianism in Historical Perspective" and James M. Renihan, "Caterpillars and Butterflies," which is a book review of *New Covenant Theology in Reformation Today*, September-October 2003, No. 195, 9-16 and 23-26. NCT, as a movement, abominates practical antinomianism, and rightly so.

understanding and application of “each covenant has its own positive law” did not. It may well be that this motif is one reason why the seventeenth-century Particular Baptist Nehemiah Coxe was endeared to Owen on the Mosaic and New Covenants. If applied consistently, it eliminates *infant baptism* from the New Covenant, not the Decalogue or only its Sabbath. Coxe deals with the covenants from the covenant of works through the Abrahamic Covenant. Owen deals with the Mosaic and New Covenants in his Hebrews commentary. Both may¹¹⁰ have held to the “each covenant has its own positive law” motif, though if so, they applied it differently when it came to the subjects of baptism. But, if held to by both, neither used it to eliminate the Decalogue from the New Covenant. Hence, using Owen as a precursor to Reisinger or NCT simply does not fit the evidence.

We have examined Owen in the light of his historical and theological context and Wells’ claims that align him with John Reisinger and NCT. In view of the discussion above, it is safe to say that Owen cannot be claimed by NCT on the grounds that Wells claims him. He held some views with which NCT is sympathetic. But his views did not change, at least as far as the perpetuity of the Decalogue under the New Covenant goes, nor were they contradictory or novel. The novelty in all of this appears to be NCT’s method of abrogating the Decalogue from the New Covenant. It does this upon the grounds of it being a unit of law applicable to Old Covenant Israel as a body politic and applicable to them alone. This leads NCT to view the Old Covenant as a covenant of works in itself and unrelated to the Edenic covenant of works. Radical antinomians eliminate the Decalogue because it is law. Doctrinal antinomians eliminate it because it is Moses’ Law and not Christ’s. This has detrimental implications for the identity of the Natural Law, the basis of the covenant of works, the perpetuity of the Moral Law, the Sabbath, the active obedience of Christ, and the imputation of righteousness—indeed, the gospel itself. The issues are far-reaching and have practical relevance.

In closing, it is important to remember what was said at the outset. Owen easily can be misunderstood if not followed carefully and if his statements are not examined in light of his systematic thought and the historical and theological context in which he wrote. It appears that both John Reisinger and Tom Wells did just that.¹¹¹ May we learn from this to be careful when making claims about another’s position, especially someone who carries as much theological weight as John Owen. In making such claims, we may be making sweeping generalizations unawares and leading others to believe that which is simply not true.

¹¹⁰ Coxe does not say if this motif endeared him to Owen’s treatment of the Old and New Covenants. In Coxe’s preface to the reader, he does say that Owen’s recently published argument “That the Old Covenant and the New do differ in substance, and not in the manner of their Administration only” prevented him from writing on this subject, since he viewed his treatment as satisfactory on this point. Coxe is referring to Owen’s Hebrews commentary on Hebrews 8.

¹¹¹ The author confesses that he has done this before and, most likely will again, though without malicious intent. We must assume the same in our NCT brothers.