

• Book Reviews/Recensions/Buchbesprechungen

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The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology **C. R. Trueman**

Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998, xii + 267 pp., pb, ISBN 0 85364 798 4

RÉSUMÉ

Le livre de Carl Trueman est une vive réfutation des critiques courantes, en particulier celles du professeur Alan Clifford, dirigée contre la théologie de John Owen, qu'on a présentée comme étant influencée à l'excès par les idées téléologiques aristotéliennes. Trueman montre au contraire que la théologie d'Owen tient compte de la théologie patristique, de la théologie médiévale et de celle de la réformation, avec lesquelles elle entre en dialogue, et qu'elle doit être aussi comprise en fonction du contexte des controverses de son époque—en particulier les idées de Grotius, de Baxter, des antinomiens et des sociniens. Parmi les aspects de la théologie d'Owen, il aborde les Prolégomènes, les attributs de Dieu et, surtout, la personne et l'œuvre de Christ. Selon Trueman, la théologie d'Owen est construite fondamentalement à partir d'une pensée trinitaire inébranlable plutôt que d'idées aristotéliennes.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Carl Trumans Buch The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology ist eine entschiedene Zurückweisung zeitgenössischer Kritik (vor allem von Prof. Alan Clifford) an John Owens Theologie. Owens Kritiker sehen diese als zu sehr von aristotelisch-teleologischen Konzepten beeinflusst. Trueman weist jedoch demgegenüber darauf hin, daß Owens Theologie die patristische, mittelalterliche und reformatorische Theologie durchaus zur Kenntnis nimmt und sich mit ihr auseinandersetzt, und daß sie zudem vor dem Hintergrund der Kontroversen seiner eigenen Zeit (insbesondere den Vorstellungen von Grotius, Baxter, den Antinomialen und Sozinianern) verstanden werden muß. Trueman behandelt die folgenden Teilbereiche von Owens Theologie: die Prolegomena, den Abschnitt über die Eigenschaften Gottes sowie vor allem den über

Person und Werk Christi. Laut Trueman ist Owens theologische Perspektive nicht so sehr von aristotelischen Konzepten als vielmehr von einem soliden Glauben an die Trinität geprägt.

One of the leading scholars in the field of post-reformation studies, R. A. Muller, observed in the Calvin Theological Journal in 1995 that '... the study of Protestant orthodoxy has received more attention in the last two decades than it received in the entire earlier part of the twentieth century.' Carl Trueman's book, *The Claims of Truth*, is the latest addition to the erudite studies that pour forth on the subject, and it is a worthy contribution.

Trueman's particular field is the work of John Owen, the leading Puritan theologian, and while the author has the positive aim of presenting Owen's work as being, *inter alia*, a natural theological development of the theology of the reformers of the sixteenth century, (and indeed of all that was best in the patristic and medieval church's theology), his presentation has a strong polemical note, opposing 'those ... scholars ... interested in Puritan theology [who] accept the "Calvin against the Calvinists" thesis,' (p. 7) notably A. C. Clifford, and to a lesser extent, R. T. Kendall. Clifford in particular sees Owen's work on the extent of the atonement, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* as being governed by Aristotelian teleological ideas rather than Scripture—'Owen's early regard for Aristotle perhaps explains his inability to be thoroughly and exclusively scriptural' (quoted on p. 34, n. 77), and it is this argument that Trueman is endeavouring to refute. All this means that Trueman's work is a tapestry with the expository and polemical threads interwoven. Surprisingly, the combination of these elements works well, and the result is a satisfying exposition of Owen's theology, together with a stimulating interaction with the author's opponents.

The preface to the work is important, because it alerts us to the approach adopted by the writer. 'I write' he says, 'as a historian of ideas, not as a systematic theologian. My interest is not to discover whether Owen was right or wrong, but to see what he said, why he said it ... and how he fits into the theological context of his own times and of the western tradition as a whole.' (p. ix) In this reviewer's

opinion, Trueman has been faithful to his task.

A less happy note in the preface is the laboured protestation of a sincere struggle for objectivity, and the explanatory and almost apologetic note on the apparently 'value laden' terminology of the work. One has to ask whether such explanations are necessary—only fairness and honesty are required, and they are, in this case, clearly evident! The work itself begins by placing 'Owen in Context', and this chapter is masterly. An introductory section outlines the relatively limited theological interest in Owen, and within a few pages, Trueman's sword is unsheathed, and wielded against both the fundamentalists, whom the writer sees as interested in Owen as supporting their particular brand of orthodoxy rather than as a writer to be placed in his historical context, and the 'Calvin against the Calvinists' school mentioned above. As the latter school is more important to Trueman, he is at pains to show that any attempt to evaluate Owen in relation to Calvin must take into account the Genevan reformer's teaching as a whole, and not just one or two isolated areas of his thought. This leads him to point out further that the best seventeenth century theologians, including Owen, were interacting with the whole Western theological tradition, as indeed were the reformers themselves. Trueman then discusses the influence of the Reformed Orthodox movement as a whole, and the context of heretical views, whether Roman, Arminian or Socinian, on Owen's theological approach. Because Clifford places great emphasis on the supposed influence of Aristotle on Owen, Trueman devotes several pages to showing that the presence of Aristotelian thought in Owen's work does not determine whether he was indebted to Aristotle for his theological system—'Owen's Aristotelian language must be judged by how the words are used by him, not what they meant to Aristotle . . .' (p. 44).

The main body of Trueman's work uses the traditional theological loci of prolegomena, the doctrine of God, and the person and work of Christ, as these are dealt with by Owen, and the great Puritan is quoted extensively to show that in all these fields, he is indebted not to Aristotle, but to his deep commitment to an understanding of theology that is governed by a profound trinitarianism. This, Trueman

affirms, with more than adequate support from the primary sources, is as true of Owen's *Doctrine of God* as of his *Principles of Theology* (See inter alia, pp. 98–99 and 149).

The crucial and climactic chapter is on 'The Nature of Satisfaction' (p. 199–226). As Trueman rightly points out: 'At the heart of Owen's discussion of Christ's priestly office, and at the heart of negative critiques of Owen's thought, lies the problem of Christ's satisfaction.' (p. 199) The value of Trueman's treatment is in the way in which he carefully places Owen's work in the context of Grotius, Baxter, and seventeenth century antinomians. His massive *Death of Death* is made more apposite, by the recognition that it is a response to inadequate, and even heretical, views of the atonement current among Owen's contemporaries. It is this context, not conscious embrace of Aristotelian teleological principles that explains Owen's approach and emphasis.

Perhaps the most controversial chapter is that entitled 'The Man Who Wasn't There', in which Trueman castigates 'modern British neo-Calvinists or fundamentalists who show no interest in the patristic or medieval theology upon which Owen himself drew so positively.' (p. 230) He is equally scathing about 'the scholarship [which] remains preoccupied with judging the seventeenth century by standards other than those which were set within its own day. If one is looking for a Barth, or a Calvin, one must look in the twentieth, or the sixteenth century, respectively; it is pointless to search for one in seventeenth-century England, and even more pointless to express dismay at, or even harsh criticism of, those theologians one does find there on the grounds that they do not measure up to standards which were irrelevant in their own day.' (ibid.) Tough talk, but, in this reviewer's opinion, justified by the evidence so carefully adduced and collated by (for all his protests!) this passionate defender of one whom many have regarded as England's premier theologian of the Puritan era. *The Claims of Truth* is a valuable corrective to the recent facile dismissals of the Cliffords and Kendalls of our time, and their polarised neo-Calvinists!

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