

Some Interesting Books

Dr. Allen Baird

Particular Grace: A Defence of God's Sovereignty in Salvation
Abraham Kuyper (tr. Marvin Kamps)
Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association
 xx + 356 pp.

This book is a real treat for the non-Dutch reading theological population (and there are a few of us fools out there). It is a translation of a book of the same meaning in title - *Dat De Genade Particulier Is* - which originally began its life as a series of articles in a Dutch periodical called *The Herald* (or, *De Heraut*). The articles were written and published by Kuyper between 1879 and 1880. For those who do not know, Abraham Kuyper was the greatest Continental theologian of his generation, founder of the Free University of Amsterdam (1880), member of the Dutch parliament, and prime minister (1900-05).

The title, by itself, suggests a few possibilities as to what the main thrust of the content might be. It could be a rebuttal of the doctrine of universal saving grace such as the modernists and liberals of the main state church of Kuyper's own day, and ours too, believed in, according to the postulation that God either had or in any case would impart actual saving grace to the entire population of fallen humanity so that everyone single person will be saved ("Universalism"). Or, it might be an outline of Kuyper's own thoughts on his understanding of the differences between "common grace" - the systematic construction of the doctrine of which was one of the chief accomplishments of his life - and saving grace (for which he even insisted upon a different word in the Dutch; on this, see the helpful Appendix entitled "Abraham Kuyper's Distinction between Grace and Gratie").

However, the real target here is different from both of these. Kuyper is interested in defending the doctrine of particular grace in the sense of

particular redemption or “limited” atonement; the L out of the TULIP acrostic which serves to classify in a popular setting the so-called Five Points of Calvinism. Of course, the classic defence of this doctrine had already been written some 200 years earlier by John Owen - with whom Kuyper is familiar (see p. 344) - in his famous and irrefutable treatise *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. So was Kuyper merely tramping over old ground here? No, for the following reasons. Firstly, a new situation had arisen in the Dutch church which called for a fresh exposition of the doctrine. Second, Kuyper had to use language and a setting such as would be most liable to gain him a hearing with his intended audience. Simply recommending to them that they go read the prolix work of a long dead Englishman would hardly have done the trick.

Because of the literary origins of the book, the chapters are fairly short and self-contained. Each one deals with a different text, refutes a different argument, or produces a separate counter argument. What struck me about these various arguments of Kuyper is their *organic diversity* - a phrase Kuyper would have liked! In other words, he employs very many arguments to prove his point, and arguments of very many types, yet he succeeds in painting a picture of the whole teaching of the Scripture on the whole work of redemption, so by the time he has finished, you wonder how anyone could miss this truth, so clear and obvious does it now appear before your eyes.

Exegetical points are considered; classic universalistic texts are faced (e.g. (1 John 2:2; 1 Tim. 2:4 and 2 Pet. 3:9) as well as several the “all” and “world” passages which Arminians commonly, instinctively and unthinkingly utter. As might be expected, Kuyper also focuses on some aspects of systematic theology, particularly Christology, to demonstrate the relationship between who Christ is and what Christ has accomplished. A large section is given over to what today is known as “salvation-history” or “biblical theology” in which Kuyper examines the flow of redemptive truth from Adam right through to Christ Himself. There are also sections in which Kuyper has cause to examine the various creeds and confessions of the church and the writings of earlier Reformed theologians (his

defensive tone is noteworthy in this regard; it seems that his opponents in the state church were ignorant as to believe that their “universal” position was actually orthodox!).

All this is very good, but not, in itself, entirely new. What was new - to me, at least - and most interesting was Kuyper’s argument for particular grace from the perspective of Christian experience. His argument here is that those who most strongly appeal against particular grace “*are themselves the purest particularists when they talk about their own spiritual experience*” (p. 111). Kuyper argues that such people have a far more orthodox and heavenly “spirituality” or living faith than they do “theology;” in the latter they are misguided and erroneous, while in the former they are sound and faithful. When asked about their salvation, they will protest in the strongest possible terms that God has found them, God was merciful to them, God deserves all the glory, they did not assist God, all their best works are sinful and useless, etc. Kuyper, while acknowledging them as brethren, charges them with being “two faced” - one way in “doctrine” and another way on their “knees” before their God (p.114). (This is similar to an argument used by J. I. Packer in the first chapter of his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*.)¹ I think that this is an important argument to emphasise in these days when certain pseudo-Calvinists would have us believe that all professing Christians who do not know or assent to the “Five Points” thereby demonstrate their unregenerate nature. Kuyper would have no time at all for such doctrinal Phariseeism.

A few comments in conclusion about the book as a book. This edition is well bound in hardback form and brown leather style. The print is

¹Packer argued here that all *true* Christians actually believe in the sovereignty of God because (1) they give God thanks for their conversions and (2) they pray to God for the conversion of others, which two things they could not do if they really believed that God was not God. Packer’s conclusion is, “What is true is that all Christians believe in divine sovereignty, but some are not aware that they do, and mistakenly imagine and insist that they reject it.” Then, in words reminiscent of those of Kuyper quoted above, Packer says, “On our feet we may have arguments about it, but on our knees we are all agreed.” What Packer does with the general doctrine of divine sovereignty, Kuyper does with the particular doctrine of limited atonement. Speaking personally, I was not entirely conformable with this argument when I first across it many years ago, but after reading Kuyper’s rendition of it, I am persuaded now that there is much truth to it.

large enough to be easily, even pleasantly, read. Although quite ignorant of such matters, it appears to me that Mr. Kamps has done first class job in the area of translation. The text reads beautifully in very many places, making one wonder how superb a read Kuyper must be in the original Dutch. Mr. Kamps has also added sporadic footnotes at the bottom of various pages in the book, mostly by way of biographical or historic explanation, and in some few - and necessary, in my judgement - places taking slight exception to a point Kuyper has written (for example, see pages 237-6:1 and 310:7), while at other times offering a generous interpretation (for example, see pages 223:4 and 268:2). He has also written an informative introduction which sets the doctrinal and historical context, as well as some brief discussion of method and translation.

All in all, this is a most excellent book, and is highly recommended. It should be read deliberately and carefully... but it should be read!

Redeem the Time: Sin in the Writings of John Owen

Steve Griffiths

Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2001

301 pp.

Once upon a time the Puritans were viewed as embarrassing theological relics of a best forgotten period of British and American history. That this is no longer the case is due, in the first instance, to the now booming state of Calvin studies internationally. The writings of Calvin are not only analysed but increasingly employed by theologians from backgrounds which would once have been intractably opposed to all that Calvin stood for. This has had a knock-on effect with regard to the study of Calvin's seventeenth century successors, the most obvious examples of which in the English speaking world are the Puritans. But, in the second instance, there has also been some fresh scholarly interest in the Puritan period from an historical and sociological perspective, and works have been produced which have done much to dispel the old caricature of the Puritans

as religious fanatics and dour kill-joys (in this regard, see especially the work of the communist historian Christopher Hill).

If these two strands, the theological and the historical, are woven together, then it will be found that the person of John Owen stands at the very centre of the Puritan project. The English Puritans never produced a greater theologian than Owen - with the debatable exception of William Perkins - and certainly no theologian who was so involved in social activity and ecclesiastical debate as Owen, the chaplain to Oliver Cromwell and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, undoubtedly was. Good books have already been written about the life (Peter Toon) and theology (J. I. Packer and Sinclair Ferguson [who wrote this book's Forward]) of Owen. Perhaps the best Owenian scholar at the moment is Carl R. Trueman, whose main work on Owen, entitled *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology*, has already received a largely positive review in an earlier BRJ by Rev. Ronald Hanks (see April-June 2000, pp. 46-48). Those interested in this field should also read *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Paternoster Press, 1999), edited by Carl R. Trueman and R. S. Clark.

Griffiths' book is an attempt to interact with and build upon the work of those Owenian scholars mentioned above with the purpose of focusing on one area of Owen's theology which Griffiths believes is central to the entire body of Owen's thought and which has not received adequate attention before: Owen's hamartology or doctrine of sin. Lest this be thought to be overly narrow or morbid, a few points require making from the outset. First, Griffiths is not trying to argue that hamartology was *the* central motif of Owen's thought, which he acknowledges to have been rather the sovereignty of God. But Griffiths wants to show that Owen was interested in a pastoral or applied theology rather than a speculative or abstract one, one that would be of use to the lives of real men in a sin-cursed world. Second, Griffiths does interact with the usual broad loci and interpretative motifs when analysing Owen on sin. Hence, the first chapter opens with an examination of "Owen's Theological Framework," e.g., federal/covenant theology and the doctrine of the

image of God in man and Christ. Third, Griffiths does all in his power to distance Owen from any of the sort of morbid introspectionism and glory in self-doubt that some of the Puritans were doubtless guilty of.

After setting the theological scene, Griffiths spends the next three chapters, and the bulk of the book, relating Owen's doctrine of sin to the individual, society, and the church. The first of these deals describes how sin has captured the mind, the affections and the will, how it destroys the image of God in man, finds its outworking in and through out bodies, and leaves us open to the influence of Satan. There is some interesting discussion in this chapter of Owen's view of the primacy of the intellect (p. 59), his use of and departure from both Augustine and Aquinas in constructing his view of the image (they starting with Adam and projecting forward, Owen starting with Christ and working back), and the question of whether Owen believed that man has totally lost the image in the fall (pp. 86-89).

The chapter on "Sin and Society" was particularly interesting due to the number of controversial features of Owen's thought that came to the fore. Even though Owen was a Congregationalist by conviction, and therefore opposed to the idea of an established church, Griffiths shows how Owen held to a strong notion of "corporate holiness" which extended to all social spheres including the nation. Owen rejected any distinction between sacred and secular, all areas of God's created order and all lawful vocations of men having a vital part to play in the purpose of redemption (p. 115). Tied in with this was Owen's eschatological beliefs which were, as was the norm at the time, what we would today call post-millennial in expectation (p. 109) and historicist in interpretation (p. 114). There is much fascinating biographical material in this chapter on Owen's increasing shift towards Republicanism in light of his estrangement from Cromwell and the Restoration of the monarchy.

Much of the material on the chapter "Sin and the Church" consists of what we might expect: an account of Owen's polemical war against various forms of doctrinal heresy. These heresies were those gross theological

errors that were the most prevalent in his day - Arminianism, Socinianism, Quakerism and Roman Catholicism. Griffiths shows how clearly Owen and his colleagues linked the first and last of these together, and indeed, how much in the minds of the Puritans these two were substantially the same thing. Some of the quotations of Puritan thought regarding Romanism are almost shocking in their ferocity. However, it is in his treatment of Quakerism that I found Griffiths at his weakest. Through out the rest of his book Griffiths seems to be in sympathy if not outright agreement with Owen, but in a section dealing with Owen's view of the gifts of the Spirit, Griffiths rejects Owen's sound cessationism (pp. 76-78) and thereby seems to concede the essence of the argument to the Quakers, known in ancient days as Montanists and today as Charismatics. There are also some very interesting references make to Owen's polemical war with the Antinomians, and how Owen came to reject the doctrine of eternal justification in this context (pp. 74, 230-232).

The final chapter on "Sin and the Need for Holiness" is the most profitable and constructive in the entire book. Griffiths treats such positive themes as Owen's doctrine of holiness, spiritual mindedness, mortification and union with Christ. This comes as a real tonic to the reader after having plodded through all the previous data about historical setting and polemic rumpus. One feels that the true heart of Owen's doctrine of sin is only being faced now at the end, for, as Griffiths points out, Owen was primarily a pastor whose chief concern is to tend to the souls of God's people.

In conclusion, there are several problems with this book, beyond those already mentioned. The subject index is pathetically inadequate, the main title is irrelevant and misleading, and oftentimes the argument less than dense with material sometimes wandering and unfocused. However, on the positive side, there is a satisfying blend of theology and history throughout the book, and a bibliography and list of various types of sources that is almost worth its price alone. As a good general introduction to Owen, Griffiths' book will be hard to beat.