

Christ and the Condition

**The Covenant Theology of
Samuel Petto (1624–1711)**

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Michael Brown



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To Jane...

my loving wife and fellow pilgrim

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Acknowledgments

This research began in the fall of 2007 when I returned to Westminster Seminary California as a student. Having graduated with an MDiv from Westminster Seminary California (WSC) in 2004 and subsequently entering pastoral ministry in the United Reformed Churches in North America, I wanted to pursue further study in the area of historical theology. I am grateful to the faculty of WSC for allowing me that opportunity.

There are some people in particular to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for the completion of this study. First, to my mentor, friend, and pastoral colleague at Christ United Reformed Church, Dr. Michael Horton, for his instruction in covenant theology and gracious encouragement; and to my principal teacher in historical theology, Dr. R. Scott Clark, for his candid advice and kind direction, and apart from whom I would not have entered WSC (the first time or the second!). If there is any merit to my work in this study, it is due in large part to them.

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Introduction

Discussion and debate about the Mosaic covenant was still in full swing among the Reformed orthodox when Samuel Petto (ca. 1624–1711) published *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant Stated and Explained: With an Exposition of the Covenant of Grace in the Principal Concernments of It* in 1674. As the orthodox divines defended, clarified, and codified the doctrines and practices of the early Reformation, they wrestled with the question of how the old and new covenants relate within the history of redemption. Although a substantive continuity remained between the thoughts of Calvin and his contemporaries and their Reformed orthodox successors with regard to God's one plan of salvation (i.e., *sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus*) mediated in one covenant of grace (*foedus gratiae*), there were competing views among the successors regarding how the Mosaic covenant fit into that system. As the later group responded to challenges from Socinianism, Arminianism, and Roman Catholicism, as well as internal disputes concerning antinomianism and neonomianism, two general schools of interpretation emerged. The first school taught that the Mosaic covenant was the covenant of grace legally administered. The second school, however, taught that the Mosaic covenant was *distinct from* the covenant of grace. Within these two schools of Reformed thought existed a wide spectrum of views regarding how the Mosaic covenant, with its prescribed works, specifically related to the covenant of grace and its new-covenant administration. Representatives from both schools taught that the Mosaic covenant somehow renewed or republished the original covenant of works (*foedus operum*).

Despite the voluminous writings on covenant theology at the time, Petto, an Independent (or Non-Separating Congregationalist) pastor, believed more work needed to be done and thus devoted his pen to the matter. “There are many useful Treatises already extant on this subject,” said Petto, “but still there are some weighty points referring to it, as with Jesus Christ, and especially concerning the Old mount Sinai covenant and also the New, which have need of farther clearing.”¹

Petto’s Significance

Petto was not as prolific a writer as some of his contemporaries, yet he may have had a more significant role in the development of British covenant theology than his present obscurity suggests. His book *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant* did not go unnoticed. None other than John Owen (1616–1683), who was the preeminent Puritan theologian and one of the most influential men of his generation, wrote the foreword to this book.² Owen called Petto a “Worthy Author” who labored “with good success,”³ and there is some evidence to suggest that Petto’s work may have influenced Owen’s thinking on the subject. Moreover, in 1820, twenty-nine Scottish ministers and theologians called for Petto’s book to be republished, “entirely approving and recommending it, as a judicious and enlightened performance.”⁴

1. Samuel Petto, *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant Stated and Explained: With an Exposition of the Covenant of Grace in the Principal Concernments of It* (London, 1674), A2 in the preface to the reader. In my quotes and citations of primary sources in English, I replicate all unconventional spelling and punctuation from the original publications.

2. Carl Trueman says of Owen, “In his own day he was chaplain to Cromwell, preacher to Parliament, Chancellor of Oxford University, leading light of the Independents, and the pre-eminent Puritan theologian. By any standard one of the most influential men of his generation.” *The Claims of Truth* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998), 1. Owen’s fellow Congregationalist, Ambrose Barnes, said that Owen was “the Calvin of England.” See Peter Toon, *God’s Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1971), 173.

3. John Owen, preface to *Difference between the Old and New Covenant*, by Samuel Petto, n.p. Owen also wrote a preface to Patrick Gillespie’s work *The Ark of the Covenant Opened* (1677), which was one of five volumes Gillespie wrote on covenant theology.

4. A list of the names, as provided by the publisher of the 1820 reprint, included Dr. M’Crie of Edinburgh, Professor Paxton of Edinburgh, Rev. George Moir of Edinburgh, Dr. Pringle of Perth, Rev. James Aird of Rattray, Rev. Matthew Fraser of

The Difference between the Old and New Covenant was reprinted in Aberdeen in 1820 as *The Great Mystery of the Covenant of Grace*. Thus, Petto's work serves as a window into the era of high orthodoxy (ca. 1640–1725) and also provides us with a view of the development of British covenant theology that helped to shape later generations of Reformed thought.⁵

The Current State of Scholarship

There are at least three reasons this study is needed. First, Samuel Petto's name is scarcely known today; few students of Reformed orthodoxy and English Puritanism will recognize it. Secondary

Dundee, Rev. Adam Blair of South Ferry, Rev. W. Ramage of Kirriemuir, Rev. James Hay of Alyth, Rev. Alexander Balfour of Lethendy, Rev. David Waddell of Shiels, Rev. Patrick Robertson of Craigdam, Rev. J. Ronaldson of Auchmacoy, Rev. John Bunyan of Whitehall, Rev. James Millar of Huntly, Dr. Kidd of Aberdeen, Rev. A. Gunn of Wattan, Rev. Niel Kennedy of Logie Elgin, Rev. Hector Bethune of Alness, Rev. Hugh Ross of Fearn, Rev. Thos. Monro of Kiltearn, Rev. John M'Donald of Thurso, Rev. A. Stewart of Wick, Rev. John Monro of Nigg, Rev. Isaac Kitchin of Nairn, Rev. David Anderson of Boghole, Rev. Thomas Stark of Forres, Rev. Simon Somerville of Elgin, and Rev. Robert Crawford of Elgin. Samuel Petto, *The Great Mystery of the Covenant of Grace* (Aberdeen: Alexander Thompson, 1820).

5. See Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:30–32. According to Muller, early orthodoxy runs from 1565 and the deaths of “many of the important second-generation codifiers of the Reformed faith (John Calvin, Wolfgang Musculus, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and Andreas Hyperius)” to 1640 and the deaths of “the theologians who sat at Dort and perpetuated its carefully outlined confessionalism.” High orthodoxy followed, which ran from 1640 to 1725. The first phase, 1640–1685, is characterized by “internal or intraconfessional controversies, such as the broader Amyraldian controversy and the debate over Cocceian federal theology as well as the vast expansion of debate with the Socinians over the doctrine of the Trinity.” After 1685, “the tenor of orthodoxy changed, although the confessional boundaries continued to remain relatively in place....The changes that took place included an increased pressure on the precritical textual, exegetical, and hermeneutical model of orthodoxy, an alteration of the philosophical model used by theologians from the older Christian Aristotelian approach to either a variant of the newer rationalism or a virtually a-philosophical version of dogmatics. This is also the era of the beginning of internal divisions in the Reformed confessions over the issues raised by the piety of the Further Reformation, or *Nadere Reformatie*, and by the dispossessed status of Reformed Protestants in England and France. By 1725, a fairly uniform and unified confessional subscription had faded both in England and in Switzerland.”

literature devoted to Petto is almost nonexistent,⁶ and taxonomies of seventeenth-century covenant theology omit his name altogether.⁷ In recent years, historical studies have referred to him in connection with his nonconformist ecclesiology⁸ and his works on eschatology,⁹ pneumatology,¹⁰ and witchcraft (a subject of growing interest in both

6. See Mark Jones's introduction to the 2007 reprint of *Difference between the Old and New Covenant, The Great Mystery of the Covenant of Grace* (Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Tentmaker, 2007), 9–27; and Donald Strickland's article, "E. F. Kevan, Samuel Petto and Covenant Theology," *Reformation Today*, no. 137 (January 1994): 27–32.

7. Petto's name does not appear, for example, in the following taxonomies of seventeenth-century covenant theology: R. Scott Clark, "Christ and Covenant: Federal Theology in Orthodoxy" in *Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. Herman Selderhuis (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming); Brenton C. Ferry, "Works in the Mosaic Covenant: A Reformed Taxonomy" in *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, ed. Bryan Estelle, J. V. Fesko, David VanDrunen (Philipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2008); Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray's and Meredith G. Kline's Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1999); Mark W. Karlberg, "The Mosaic Covenant and the Concept of Works in Reformed Hermeneutics: A Historical-Critical Analysis with Particular Attention to Early Covenant Eschatology" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1980); and Rowland S. Ward, *God and Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* (Wantrina, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003). Moreover, Petto is not profiled in popular surveys of the Puritans.

8. See Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 267; Francis J. Bremer, *Congregational Communion: Clerical Friendship in the Anglo-American Puritan Community* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), 191–248; and Richard P. Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State Press, 2004), 191.

9. See David Brady, *The Contribution of British Writers between 1560 and 1830 to the Interpretation of Revelation 13.16–18 (the Number of the Beast): A Study in the History of Exegesis* (Tuebingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), 17, 119, 215–16; and Kenneth G. C. Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5, 57.

10. See D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Crawford Gribben, *God's Irishmen: Theological Debates in Cromwellian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ian Harris, *The Mind of John Locke: A Study of Political Theory in Its Intellectual Setting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and especially G. F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Old and New England during the seventeenth century),¹¹ but his covenant theology has been largely neglected.¹²

Second, an examination of Petto's work will also prove beneficial in refuting the so-called "Calvin versus the Calvinists" thesis, which has indicted post-Reformation English Reformed theologians on charges of hijacking the warm and scriptural theology of Calvin and other early Reformers with a cold scholasticism, Aristotelianism, and rationalism.¹³ Petto's federal theology provides us with more evidence in defense of the argument for seeing Reformed orthodoxy as the legitimate and faithful heir of Calvin.¹⁴ Analysis of Petto's work

11. See Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 122–23; and Gilbert Geis and Ivan Bunn, *A Trial of Witches: A Seventeenth-Century Witchcraft Prosecution* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 140–41, 206–7.

12. There is a brief reference to Petto's covenant theology and understanding of the nature of conditionality in the covenant of grace in Richard Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory: John Bunyan and English Dissent* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 106–7.

13. See, for example, James B. Torrance, "The Concept of Federal Theology," in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor*, ed. William H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); James B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (February 1970): 51–76; Basil Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists," in *John Calvin*, ed. G. E. Duffield, Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology (Appleford, UK: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1966); B. A. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969); Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism* (Swengel, Pa.: Reiner Publications, 1973); and R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

14. Rising to defend post-Reformation scholastics as the legitimate and faithful theological heirs of Calvin have been a growing number of historical theologians led primarily by Richard Muller. This school, sometimes dubbed the "Calvin and the Calvinists" school, has offered a positive reassessment of the internal developments of post-Reformation Reformed theology. See Richard Muller, "Calvin and the Calvinists: Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between the Reformation and Orthodoxy, Part 1," in *Calvin Theological Journal* 30, no. 2 (November 1995): 345–75; Muller, "Calvin and the Calvinists: Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between the Reformation and Orthodoxy, Part 2," in *Calvin Theological Journal* 31, no. 1 (April 1996): 125–60; Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*; Muller, *After Calvin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*; Carl Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2007); Carl Trueman and R. Scott Clark, eds., *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle, UK:

stands in opposition to the claims of scholars such as R. T. Kendall, who argues that English Calvinism, through its affirmation of a limited atonement, was actually “crypto-Arminian” in its theology and made it almost impossible for one to be assured of saving faith apart from laborious works.¹⁵

Third, an examination of Petto’s covenant theology in its historical context may also be useful to discussions regarding works and grace in the Mosaic covenant and the doctrine of republication. A wide variety of interpretations exists among Reformed theologians on this important point. Some have followed the monocovenantalism of John Murray (1898–1975), who argued, “The view that in the Mosaic covenant there was a repetition of the so-called covenant of works, current among covenant theologians, is a grave misconception and involves an erroneous construction of the Mosaic covenant.”¹⁶ Likewise, O. Palmer Robertson has contended, “The history of God’s covenant people indicates that the covenants basically are one. The Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants do not supplant one another; they supplement one another. A basic unity binds them together.”¹⁷ On the other hand, some have seen

Paternoster, 1999); R. Scott Clark, *Casper Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2005); R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2008); R. Scott Clark, “Christ and Covenant,” in *Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*; Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982); Michael Horton, “Thomas Goodwin and the Puritan Doctrine of Assurance: Continuity and Discontinuity in the Reformed Tradition, 1600–1680” (PhD diss., Wycliffe Hall, Oxford and Coventry University, 1996); Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999); Lyle D. Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); Lyle D. Bierma, “The Role of Covenant Theology in Early Reformed Orthodoxy,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 21 (1990): 453–62.

15. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 3–4, 205, 209. Kendall criticizes the syllogistic reasoning of Beza, Ursinus, and later English Calvinists, claiming that it was introspective and speculative and ultimately made faith an act of man, located in the human will. All of this, says Kendall, was a qualitative departure from Calvin and the early Reformation. See also 8–9, 33–34, 40–41, 56–57, 63, 69–74, 125, 148, 150, 179–81, 211.

16. John Murray, “The Adamic Administration” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:50.

17. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1980), 34.

a much sharper contrast in the contours of redemptive history. Meredith Kline, for example, maintained, “The Sinaitic administration...[was] in itself a dispensation of the kingdom inheritance quite opposite in principle to inheritance by guaranteed promise.”¹⁸ While “the Reformed tradition has always acknowledged and tolerated a variety of positions on the Mosaic covenant,” as Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen contend in the recently published *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, the tradition continues to need studies in historical theology (as well as studies in biblical and systematic theology) to bring light to the discussion.¹⁹ Probing the covenant theology of Petto, a theologian from the seventeenth century, may facilitate the present conversation in Reformed theology regarding the Mosaic covenant and the doctrine of republication.

Research Structure and Thesis

This study does not intend to support any particular dogmatic or biblical-theological construction, but merely to do the work of history by filling in some of the gaps in the historical picture with the purpose of examining Petto’s covenant theology. It pursues the question of what Petto believed with regard to the Mosaic covenant and considers how it protected his doctrine of justification *sola fide*. It argues that Petto viewed the Mosaic covenant as a republication of the covenant of works for Christ to fulfill as the condition of the covenant of grace in order to uphold and defend his doctrine of justification *sola fide*. In doing so, it makes several observations. First, it provides the reader with a biographical sketch of Petto. Second, it examines Petto’s general covenant schema in terms of the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*), covenant of works (*foedus operum*), and covenant of grace (*foedus gratiae*). Third, it surveys some of the competing views that emerged in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries concerning the Mosaic covenant and its relationship to the covenant of grace. Fourth, it analyzes Petto’s position on the Mosaic covenant, looking

18. Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 22–24.

19. *Law Is Not of Faith*, 20.

at how he understood the relationship of the Mosaic covenant to the covenant of works, the covenant of grace, and the new covenant. Fifth, it considers some of the implications Petto's view of the Mosaic covenant had for his doctrine of justification *sola fide*.