

## RESPONSE TO RYAN MCGRAW'S REVIEW

by Michael G. Brown

IT IS UNFORTUNATE when a book review requires a response. Theological journals should be places where iron sharpens iron, especially among fellow ministers of the gospel. Negative reviews of a book, when done fairly, are opportunities for the readers to grow in their knowledge of a subject, and the reviewed author to grow in humility. But when a review misrepresents an author's work, it robs everyone of those opportunities. I am disappointed with Ryan McGraw's evaluation of my book, *Christ and the Condition: The Covenant Theology of Samuel Petto (1624-1711)*.

McGraw makes, by my count, ten negative criticisms of the book. While one or two of these are fair critiques from which I hope to learn, most of them are unhelpful. The reviewer seems to go out of his way to find anything with which he can disagree, and narrowly takes expressions out of context and unduly criticizes my word choice. Ironically, this careless reading of my text is precisely the scholarly failure of which McGraw accuses me. More troubling, however, is that in several places McGraw distorts what I actually wrote, giving the reader a false impression of the book. I offer four concrete examples of McGraw's misleading criticisms.

First, McGraw begins by misrepresenting the thesis of the book. He says that I argue that "Petto's view of the Mosaic covenant as a republication of the covenant of works was designed to safeguard the gospel" (152). After criticizing the work several times for its lack of precision, he concludes that "the proper construction of Petto's covenant theology" is that the Sinai covenant "was a covenant of works for Christ in fulfilling the 'legal condition' of the covenant of grace" (155). This statement is rather shocking because McGraw assumes that I have somehow missed this important point, and that it should be part of my thesis. In fact, *it is my thesis*. On page 7, under a bold-print subheading that reads "Research Structure and Thesis," I write: "[My book] 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*." The reviewer may have missed it, but this is what I believe, what I state, and what I aim to defend throughout the entirety of the book.

A second example is McGraw's untrue assertion that "Brown treats an 'eschatological goal' in the covenant of works as the

standard Reformed position” (153). Nowhere do I say such a thing. In a footnote on page 36, I point out that “such a view was common among the Reformed orthodox,” and then marshal evidence to that effect. Stating that *a view* was common among Reformed theologians is hardly the same thing as claiming it was “the standard Reformed position.” For instance, in our own day it is fair to say that post-millennialism is *a view* common among Reformed people, but in no way is it *the standard position*. McGraw’s words are misleading to the reader.

Another example is McGraw’s contention that I misunderstand Petto’s view of the Mosaic covenant and its relationship to the covenant of grace. He seizes upon one sentence from page 42 in my book which states that Petto “embraced both the old and new covenants, and qualified them as one covenant of grace.” He then says that “this is directly opposed to Petto’s argument in chapters six and seven of his work” where Petto “argued that the ‘old covenant’ was not the covenant of grace, but that it was the ‘legal condition’ of the covenant of grace as it was the covenant of works published for Christ to fulfill” (154). I wrote that sentence on page 42 as part of the conclusion to my chapter that analyzes Petto’s covenant schema. My only point in that sentence is that Petto believed in the unity of the covenant of grace throughout redemptive history. I establish throughout the book the fact that Petto viewed the Mosaic covenant as the legal condition of the covenant of grace for Christ to fulfill. Again, this is part of my stated thesis, and McGraw should be able to see that clearly throughout the book. It is also necessary, though, for me to show that Petto, while making certain qualifications, believed in the continuity of the covenant of grace. McGraw seems to brush aside the fact that I said Petto “qualified” the old and new covenants as one covenant of grace, qualifications that I document repeatedly. He presents my words in such a way to make the book appear to argue something that it does not.

McGraw also claims that “the book is characterized by some historiographical problems” (153). He cites what he believes to be a few examples of this, beginning with a charge that I misunderstand Richard Muller’s thesis of continuity between the early Reformers and the Reformed orthodox. He makes this conclusion on the basis of my sentence on page 5 that “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.” McGraw argues that I am shortsighted in my understanding of Muller’s argument because I mention Calvin in that sentence instead of the larger and more complex early Reformed tradition. Contrary to McGraw’s claim, this is not a historiographical problem. Muller himself uses this language as a kind of shorthand for his thesis by publishing works titled, “Calvin and the Calvinists: Assessing

Continuities and Discontinuities between the Reformation and Orthodoxy” (published in two parts in the *Calvin Theological Journal*), “After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition” (New York: OUP, 2003), and most recently, “Calvin and the Reformed Tradition” (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012). What McGraw does not show the readers of his review is that I flesh out my statement more fully in a lengthy footnote on pages 5 and 6, and in far greater detail in Chapter 3, which is titled “The Mosaic Covenant in Reformed Orthodoxy.” Again, the reviewer has painted an inaccurate picture of the book.

I could go on, for McGraw makes several more criticisms that mislead the reader. Suffice it to say that those interested in Petto and/or the development of covenant theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries should read the book and decide for themselves if it is as shoddy in its scholarship as McGraw makes it out to be. Readers may be interested to know that this book is actually a published thesis which was defended before the faculty of Westminster Seminary California. Both my thesis adviser, Dr. Michael Horton, and thesis reader, Dr. R. S. Clark, are noted professors of historical theology who specialize in and have published much on the Reformed tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.