

The Benefit of Having a Worthy Opponent

How the Theology of Seventeenth-Century Puritans Can Be Complemented by the Nineteenth-Century German Thought Known as the Mercersburg Theology

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A Dissertation Project

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Some married couples seem mismatched and leave friends wondering how the two could ever have gotten together. The relationship may be successfully enduring and at times entertaining even if strained, but the two parties combined in covenantal union still remain remarkably different and under other circumstances would not strike one as successful candidates for pairing and productive collaboration. Thankfully the grace of God can overrule such apparent unlikeliness.

In 1957 the United Church of Christ was formed by the merger of the Congregational Christian Church and the German Evangelical and Reformed. A look back at history and at the distinctives belonging to each tradition might lead one to believe that perhaps all such historical distinctives would have to be lost for a merger to work. The merger was not without stress, and indeed much of the historical distinctions have been forgotten in an attempt to forge a new unity.

The pages which follow will attempt to survey and compare what may be considered the most noteworthy eras of two of the contributing streams from the groups represented – the seventeenth-century Puritans as part of the congregational stream, and the Mercersburg theology which developed in the mid-1800's within the German Reformed Church. Mercersburg's literature spoke very critically about Puritanism, but one its key developers, John Williamson Nevin, himself grew up an heir of Puritan influence and carried with him useful, Biblical elements of Christianity. What he boldly condemned as "Puritan" was to a large extent (but not wholly) a contemporary version of American Puritanism which in many ways had morphed into something significantly different from the earlier version of seventeenth-century England.

Nevin's chief colleague, Philip Schaff, was by far the more irenic of the two. His philosophy concerning divisions within the wider body of Christ was that some kernel of truth was usually retained by both parties, and even if one held to certain tenets in a lopsided or hostile way, the perfection of both would be the unity of both, bringing together the truth that each possessed and laboring hard to discard error which may have multiplied grossly.

How could Mercersburg and earlier Puritan theology complement each other in a healthy way? Attempting to embrace the best of each simultaneously could steer Mercersburg away from relying too heavily on philosophy instead of the Scriptures. Conversely, the philosophy of Mercersburg could aid in building a bridge from the excellent Biblical teaching of the Puritans to engage competing philosophies in the current ecclesiastical setting. The strength of Puritan writers is their ability to show the applicability of the Bible to everyday living. Is it possible to veer off course under such brilliant direction? Because of the curse of sin, it is possible to take such beautiful and thorough treatment of Scripture and launch oneself into a sea of subjectivity, eventually becoming self-focused, ignoring church history, becoming confident in one's own understanding of the Scriptures as finally the true exegesis. Such had happened within the American church among many who named themselves heirs of the Puritans, and it was to this Nevin and Schaff responded by developing the doctrine of the church as the objective body of Christ on earth inside of which truth is to be discerned.

Those themes will be unfolded in this order: a look into a significant controversy within the German Reformed church which will begin to define the conflict between Mercersburg and "Puritanism;" a brief survey of the heart of classic Puritan theology from one of its best known authors; an investigation of whether the Reformed Church's Heidelberg Catechism is compatible with the Puritan's beloved covenant theology; a look at controversy over sacramental theology; an introduction to differences on election and decrees of God; a consideration of sanctification and moral philosophy; a question of whether Mercersburg and Puritan ecclesiology could ever collaborate; an assessment of how each school of thought approached Scripture; a look at whether Nevin's use of philosophy may have led him to fatal theological error; and finally, an appendix which will survey conflicts regarding liturgy respective to each of the eras under consideration.

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