

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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CHAPTER SIX

Fighting for Free Will

Each age has its own theological battles to fight, restraining fanatical tendencies, countering enemies of the Gospel, refuting ignorance and struggling to establish the correct interpretation of Biblical passages on which major doctrinal systems rest. Because of the unpredictable nature of the conflicts and the seeming fluidity of truth as handled by some, it may seem like the search for truth is like conducting a battle at sea, where there are uncontrollable surges that demand compensation on the part of both those steering the vessels and those firing weapons. It is easy to get turned about on small matters and hard to effect change on larger ones. Some imagine that the study of theology is characterized by constant stability that makes it static and unchanging.

While those who adhere to the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture view the Bible as a solid and immovable rock, as sure and immutable revelation of God, the reality which church history portrays is that out of emerging situations necessary conflict arises over the interpretation and application of that inerrant and infallible Book. This chapter continues to unfold a contrast between the Mercersburg Theology and Puritan teaching by shifting the focus to Jonathan Edwards and John Williamson Nevin.

Both Edwards (1703-1758) and Nevin (1803-1886) sought to combat rationalism and enthusiasm in North America, and both viewed Arminianism as an enemy of the truth. However, there are numerous distinctions between their conclusions that will hopefully become clear throughout this study which is presented in the hopes that readers will benefit from these contrasts in their own attempt to find solid ground or experience victory in the battle against error in spite of the confusing turbulence of theological viewpoints in the ebb and flow of the present ecclesiastical situation in America.

To review briefly, according to Nevin the real participation in the living person, Jesus, is highlighted in Ephesians 5:30 where the church is said to be bone of Christ's bone and flesh of His flesh. This union is not a result of any joint participation of the believer and Jesus in Adam's nature. Instead one must participate in Christ's nature as a higher order than that of Adam.¹ This union believers share with Christ is more than a moral union in which two parties bind themselves together in common sympathy or mutual agreement. Nevin defines union with Christ as sharing a common life with Him, similar to how all who are born into this world share the life of Adam.²

The believer's link to Christ is more than a legal union. In acknowledging that Christ served as the substitutionary representative of His people when He suffered and died, he distances himself from the type of stance on forensic justification which is a part of some later ideas of Puritan theology when he states, "external imputation rests at last on an inward, real unity of life, without which it could have no reason or force." Therefore, participation in the Lord's Supper is not only partaking of the fruits of the atonement or the Great High Priest's intercession, but "also in his true and proper life itself." Further, this participation in Christ is not only with His divine nature or with the Holy Spirit only, since He is Christ's representative. It is with the Word made flesh. Since deity and humanity are joined inseparably, communion with Christ is with both His deity and humanity.³

Such assertions about organic union causes one to think not only of Ephesians 5:30 but also 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 where the Apostle Paul speaks of believers and Jesus forming one mystical body. Quoting Nevin, "And all these in a deep sense, form at last but one and the same life. Adam lives in his posterity, as truly as he has ever lived in his own person. They participate in his whole nature, soul and body, and are truly bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh."⁴ Likewise Christ manifests in Nevin's view both an individual and a generic life. In this way there can be a real communication of His life to His people. Christ is the true Man in a higher sense than Adam. He is the "true idea of humanity." As Nevin presents this, he appeals to the Scriptures as the authoritative test of truth to prove his thesis correct. Referencing Calvin's commentary on Genesis 2:24, he draws from there the idea that as Eve was formed from Adam so that she might be a part of him, so the church is formed from Christ, "that we may be true members of Christ, by the communication of his substance, [and] coalesce with him into one body."⁵

Adam's fall was the fall of the whole human race, not just because by decree he was assigned to be its representative, but because organically it was

¹ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 51.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 218.

“comprehended in his person.” This makes the ruin of humanity organic by nature.⁶ All participate in spiritually impotent, fallen nature because all participate in Adam’s life.

The imputation of Adam’s sin then is not an external transfer of guilt only but is imputed because all are born into Adam’s nature and into his real guilt. Yet at the same time, not a particle of Adam’s body enters ours, even as we partake of his life. The paradigm then will carry over for Nevin’s understanding of our participation in Christ as depicted in the Lord’s Supper.

A natural result of such logic is that the incarnation plays a major, central role in the accomplishing of salvation, far more central than in the corpus of Puritan writings. Nevin insists that by the hypostatic union of Christ’s two natures Adam’s fallen humanity “was exalted again to a new and imperishable divine life.”⁷ It was joined in an inner way with the divine nature in the Living Word who is the fountain of all created life. “The whole world, in its deepest sense, is longing and striving after a union with God.”⁸ Only the divine-human Christ is able to satisfy this longing for union with the Creator. The union Nevin described was not pantheism where individuality is lost and swallowed up by the general. However, the only way individuality can reach its highest stage of consciousness and personality depends on the work of the divine-human Christ.⁹ “This mystical union stands related to the hypostatical union as life to essence. The hypostatical union implies union of essence.”¹⁰

Since the Logos assumed humanity, suffering became a necessity as the only way the new life could conquer the law of sin and death that was operative in the human race. The atonement then was the victory of Christ over sin and hell and is the only medium of salvation for humans. Our author takes a moment here to downplay the federal idea of imputation as fiction. The imputation of Adam’s sin was “not a foreign evil arbitrarily set over to our account. It is immanent to our nature itself. Just so here. The atonement as a foreign work, could not be made to reach us in the way of a true salvation. Only as it may be considered immanent in our nature itself, can it be imputed to us as ours, and so become available in us for its own ends.” “When Christ died and rose, humanity died and rose at the same time in his person; not figuratively, but truly; just as it had fallen before in the person of Adam.”¹¹ Both the passive and active obedience of Christ are not arbitrarily transferred over to believers in the covenant of grace but only “by a living communication with Christ, so that it is immanent in us.”¹² The covenant of grace began in Paradise and unfolded through the Old Testament

⁶ Ibid., 155.

⁷ Ibid., 156.

⁸ William H. Erb, ed. and comp., *Dr. Nevin’s Theology* (Reading, PA: I. M. Beaver, 1913), 131.

⁹ Ibid., 133.

¹⁰ Ibid., 291.

¹¹ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 157.

¹² Erb, 223.

until the incarnation. Jesus served as Mediator under that covenant, of which the atonement was a necessary part of His work. The Mediator also serves as representative of the general life. The Old Testament revealed that the Mediator would be the seed of a woman and that He would have a human life with divine power and so at the same time transcended the normal human life.¹³

For Nevin, Christianity then is a new life, not merely a doctrine for the mind to embrace or an event to be remembered as a motivational example. The incarnation “is the supernatural linking itself to the onward flow of the world’s life, and becoming thenceforward itself the ground and principle of the entire organism”¹⁴ This new life is a true human life because the Word was made flesh. Jesus was a man more perfectly than Adam, but He did not start a parallel race to Adam’s. Instead He raised Adam’s race to a higher character with new meaning and power because it is now in union with the divine nature.¹⁵ The believer’s bond with Christ is deeper and more intimate than the initial bond with Adam.

Jonathan Edwards bypassed the concept of organic union with Adam and explained original sin in terms of a divine constitution by a conveyance of original sin to all descendants of Adam. In other words, God imputed Adam’s sin to his posterity. They did not organically participate in it.¹⁶ So neither is there regarded an organic participation in Christ. His humanity merely serves as a background to the atonement. For Edwards, grace is immediate and uncreated.

This chapter work will examine two of Edwards’ major works – *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will* and *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections in Three Parts*. Both will be found to differ much from Nevin. It will then conclude with a visit back in time to a twelfth-century work which displays with beauty perhaps the best elements of the truths gleaned from the comparison between Edwards and Nevin or the Mercersburg Theology.

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¹³ Ibid., 228-230, 235, 239.

¹⁴ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 157-158.

¹⁵ Ibid., 158.

¹⁶ William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 106, 111.

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