

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 (cont.)

John Williamson Nevin on Free Will

Dr. Nevin's class notes have been published, and what they reveal about his views on free will directly oppose most of what Edwards contained in his lofty work on the subject. He recognized three types of divine acts: immanent and intrinsic, referring to internal and essential relations in the Godhead (e.g., the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit); extrinsic and transitive, this being defined with reference to creatures as in God creating, governing and upholding; and immanent and extrinsic, "which are acts in God, which also have reference to creatures, and are called decrees."¹ He further explained the decrees of God to be "His determination with respect to things future" and that "they must be regarded not as many, but as one act."² Initially, this would seem to make him agree with Edwards if he is saying that God's decrees create necessity. Were he to stop here, one would discern that God's decrees function as a whole and are not amended or supplemented.

He defined two aspects of God's knowledge – simple intelligence which is natural and indefinite knowledge, and vision which is free and definite. Simple refers to God's knowledge of all possible things. Vision refers to His knowledge of actual things. Simple depends on His omnipotence, while vision stems from His will. But then he introduces a third type that lies between the two which he terms *scientia media*. This he claims is "the knowledge of God conditioned by the free agency of man, instead of being conditioned by His own will."³ "Thus," said Nevin, "His knowledge cannot be said to rest upon His power, nor upon His will, but is made rather to rest upon the independent will of man." He continued,

¹ Erb, 138.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. There are no Scriptures provided here, but it is unknown whether that is because none were given in the classroom lecture or if it was due to a decision or inability to make record in the notes taken by students in the class. Edwards' works are often laced with Scripture.

This view does not rest on the supposition that God's knowledge of man's actions is founded on His knowledge of their talents, though it is sometimes taken in this way. This would involve in the end that the liberty which it aims to assert would lose its character, for the result of man's actions would then after all be the result of God's will. There would be no difference between God's knowledge of moral and physical results, and the *scientia media* would fall to the ground.⁴

Nevin saw a distinction between moral and physical actions and believed that the knowledge of God regarding moral actions was intuitive. He held that moral actions were to a great extent the product of human free will. In this, he failed to disprove Edwards' arguments which pointed out the illogical nature of insisting on human free will. Nevin's thinking does not always seem sure on the matter because he would frequently use phrases like "to some degree" or "to a great extent." He taught that "although the human mind is to some degree conditional, yet we must grant it an independent causation, or we have no room for the *scientia media*."⁵

This does not immediately strike the reader as an argument derived from Scripture. The goal was to preserve the *scientia media*, and so reasoning backwards, one must adopt an assumption that the human will can determine itself independently and is not subject to external causes of necessity.

Nevin did concede that the actions of men "are to a very great extent conditioned by the laws of nature and external influence." "Yet," he maintained, "the idea of human freedom requires us to admit that there is another power in man, which to a greater or less extent can overthrow all previous calculations and determinations, and can set itself up even against the will of God."⁶

As was reviewed in the introduction of this chapter, Nevin is a champion of organic union with Christ's humanity. His writings strongly embrace organic union with Adam as the first head of the human race as well as organic union with Christ. So it is surprising that such a promoter of organic union would not adopt the view that all of Adam's descendants are corrupted with Adam's corruption and unable to choose or desire grace. Is he saying that men can break free of their organic union with Adam in order to be joined to Christ who sanctifies them and grants renewed desires?

As much as Nevin championed Calvin's views on organic union, with like intensity he rejected Calvin's teaching on the corruption of the human will which necessitated election if any are to be saved. He said, "God does not treat men like insensible stones, but treats them morally by calling into existence the will

⁴ Ibid., 139.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 139-140.

under a free form.”⁷ Edwards showed in his work that men are moral agents who are corrupted in their wills.

In order to facilitate his desire to preserve his *scientia media*, Nevin must hold that even with fallen man there is an element of the will that retains power that is not in the realm of God’s natural or indefinite knowledge or the knowledge of vision. If *scientia media* were to be dissolved, Nevin believed the only remaining option would be the Arminian position that held there are events not known to God.

“The decrees of God are admitted on the ground that God as an intelligent Being could not act without plan in the execution of His work.”⁸ Nevin understands those decrees to include creation which rests on a previous determination. Yet he would not agree with Edwards that all human actions of the will rest on previous determinations which reveal that the human will is corrupted and cannot be freed except by divine decree.

God has plans for His creation. “God’s providence designs plainly to bring the whole created existence to some glorious end.” “All nature is full of design.” But then Nevin says, “The plan of the world, however, is not the result of premeditation and calculation on the part of God.”⁹ So His decrees only extend so far in Nevin’s opinion. Edwards cited many Scriptures to the contrary, verses which revealed God is in complete control of all things. Recall Edwards’ section on how many actions by moral agents were necessary in order for the four kingdoms prophesied by Daniel to come into existence.

Nevin’s attempt to preserve the sovereignty of the human will turns toward a philosophical discussion of eternity. God issues decrees before His works come to fruition. He issues them first in order and in time. Yet because God is not bound by time He works in eternity which is not a succession of periods. So he concludes, “We cannot, therefore, speak of decrees as of a premeditated plan. The decrees seem to be joined to the work of creation itself, for there is no succession in the divine will.” “God’s decrees are an explanation of one fact in the creation, and all that comes out of this fact, in the process of time, was potentially embodied in it from the beginning.”¹⁰

He continues on to unfold his philosophy by explaining that there are two ways we may understand the concept of making a plan. The first is to adopt a wise goal and then find the proper means to achieve the desired outcome. This is what one does in constructing a building or assembling a watch. The final product then stands on its own, apart from the one executing the plan. This is not the way Nevin pictures the relationship between God and the universe.

⁷ Ibid., 140.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 141.

The second concept of making a plan is what appeals to Nevin. He explains,

A second conception of a teleological plan is that the whole life process is comprehended in the germ. It contains the end in itself, and this end conditions the relation of all the parts. The end here is immanent. The watch has its end, not in itself, but beyond itself. The world is an organism, including in itself an end by which all parts are regulated. Hence the design is comprehended in it. The very existence of such a design implies a decree. The decree exists in it, not, however, in a pantheistic way. There is a superintending personality in the universe, so that the world is not regulated by its inherent decree merely. God is actually in the world, yet not identical with it.¹¹

A point of agreement could be construed with Edwards in that Edwards saw the world as constantly in a state of being created. Therefore the presence and power and wisdom of God are every moment sustaining it. What Nevin is trying to do is to present God as sovereign and preserve complete freedom of the human will at the same time. So God's purposes are immanent, woven into every bit of fabric of the universe. All actions are constantly pregnant with God's goals and purposes. Yet within that environment, the actions of humans to sin or be sanctified are not to be regarded as necessary. This is a hybrid teleological scheme.

Nevin observes that divine reason is evident in the entire constitution of nature¹² as well as history. There must be a wise plan operating according to decree. Thus "the world is not a mechanism externally put together of different parts and then set in motion."¹³ Here Nevin uses a word to describe the viewpoint that God elects who will be saved and passes over others. He characterizes that position as holding to *abstract* decrees of God which he sees as not integrally related to the goal or end.

His perspective which highlights the organic relations in the universe which so beautifully highlights the glory of the incarnation and the believer's union with the humanity of Christ, seem to become so important to Nevin that he wants to elevate it in such a way as to subject all aspects of soteriology to serve it. He believes that if God decreed who would be saved and who would be given over to condemnation, that such a decree is arbitrary, and the universe becomes a mechanical outworking of an abstraction where "the whole work of redemption is reduced to a mere means employed to accomplish the end of that abstract plan. Thus the redemption becomes particular, whereas, it must be and is general." "It

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² In the section on Edwards I noted that the idea of human volition springing from nothing sounded much like evolutionary theories which deny God's sovereignty and maintain that the universe sprang from nothing. Earlier in Erb's notes Nevin gives credence to the newly developing theory of evolution.

¹³ Ibid., 142.

would be false to say any part of humanity would be excluded from the work of redemption by an abstract decree. That all persons are not actually included is not because God has decreed to exclude them, but because of their relation to the whole.” “If however, the decree is included in the constitution of the world, we may see how only a part of mankind is saved without admitting a limited atonement.”¹⁴

Ironically, it seems Nevin falls prey to some of the things he wishes to avoid. The idea that persons are saved or lost simply because of the way circumstances unfold in their lives seems impersonal and abstract as opposed to a very personal and concrete selection of some to be saved from the sea of lost men and women. In his attempt to relate the universe organically to a general decree of God to produce salvation in the end, Nevin has overlooked the organic nature of the operations of the Trinity in applying themselves intimately in the world to save sinners. Could a decree to save the elect not be an outgrowth of God’s inner organic working? Such a decree does not mean He and His wisdom and the final goal He has planned are not immanent in all the fabric of the universe. In fact, it clarifies His immanent presence in that He has definite and specific goals for each person. In an effort to stress immanence, Nevin sacrifices transcendence, the fact that God can do as He pleases.

Nevin wants to understand God as painting with a broad brush when applying His decrees but has to admit that in the end specificity and detail result. However, that specificity and detail are worked out by human volition and free moral agency. In arguing for this viewpoint he relies more on what seems logical to human reason than on what is found in Scripture. He does not want to say that Christ is Redeemer of the elect only but prefers to present the Messiah as saving the human race generally, even though he denies all will be saved. The number is set by the outworking of the process of redemption, just like the number of people to be born in the world is worked out naturally in the process of creation (which must be left up to human desire and ability and opportunity and not predetermined by a decree of God which Nevin would classify as arbitrary).

In his effort to justify God as measuring up to human standards of reason regarding His impartiality and justice, Nevin denies “that particular moral acts are predetermined with such a force as would render them absolutely necessary.” He says, “We are bound by Scripture and by reason to admit the absolute sovereignty of God on the one hand and the free agency of man on the other, though there be a seeming contradiction.”¹⁵ Yet Edwards demonstrated plainly how the acts of Jesus were necessary and predetermined and that God’s justice and virtue are not damaged by that fact. Since the church is in vital, organic union with the humanity of Christ, how can one conclude that the acts of the Head of the Body are/were necessary, but the acts of the Body are not? Perhaps it is Nevin who is arbitrarily imposing restrictions on God or arbitrarily imposing

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 144.

standards which God must meet to justify His decrees of election to sinners born in organic union with Adam, who bear the corruption in understanding that infected the first earthly father. While it is unfair to label Nevin as a liberal, the words of John Henry Newman, a contemporary of Nevin's who was an Anglican priest but converted to Roman Catholicism, seem fitting here. He wrote in his 1865 autobiography *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*,

Liberalism then is the mistake of subjecting to human judgment those revealed doctrines which are in their nature beyond and independent of it, and of claiming to determine on intrinsic grounds the truth and value of propositions which rest for their reception simply on the external authority of the Divine Word.¹⁶

In contradistinction to Edwards, Nevin asserted that "our actions are not always the result of the strongest motive, as is contended by some, but the result of our free will."¹⁷ But as Edwards pointed out, if there is no rational basis from which the human will operates, then decision-making becomes absurd, and the fact that Nevin's lectures were given to influence students to believe a certain way is absurd because the will is free to choose the opposite of what is presented as logical or desirable.

To further reveal Nevin's position, understand that he would see a particular event like a lightning strike not as a result of an abstract decree from God but instead as stemming from a general decree wherein the powers of nature can act freely to some extent toward a general end.¹⁸ Yet many places in Scripture indicate that the least details (such as the casting of lots in Proverbs) are directly under God's personal supervision if not the result of a special decree.

Nevin delineates three properties he perceives in God's decrees. First, they are from all eternity in the mind of God but carried out or accomplished in time. He would acknowledge then that believers were chosen in Christ before time began.¹⁹

Secondly, God's decrees are wise, which is demonstrated by God choosing the best possible ends as well as the best possible means to achieve those ends. The selection of means is included in the determining of the ends. "The works of God are organic; and an organic end includes the whole process of means for its accomplishment."²⁰

¹⁶ Quoted in John Nicholas Blaha, "Truth for Youth: Newman's Insight into the Predicament of Youth Today" *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 29.2 (2016): 43.

¹⁷ Erb, 144.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 145.

Interestingly, Nevin at this stage of the argument points out how human wisdom and God's wisdom differ. He explains that human wisdom first adopts a goal and then secondly submits to a law or structure or boundaries or direction in one's subsequent thoughts in order to reach that goal. So at this point humans are no longer free but conditioned by an overarching goal. But did he not say that people can override any direction into which they have set themselves and freely choose otherwise? Is he saying that humans are bound by necessity due to their own goals or motives? If so, then Edwards would be vindicated in that humans are bound by necessity due to natural evil and indwelling moral evil which dictates and restricts goals to be selected.

Nevin claims that God is not bound by any such conditioning or necessity as humans are because He creates both ends and means together. This agrees with the simplicity of God, but does it not fall out of line with the necessity of God to act consistently within His nature? Nevin later acknowledges that "God exists by the necessity of His own nature"²¹

The third property Nevin claims for God's decrees is that they do not depend on any influence outside the divine mind; "God's freedom is absolute; ours is relative and complete only as it moves in the freedom of God."²² But it seems Nevin is saying that God is absolutely free, except to issue decrees involving election of particular persons. He says that God does not formulate law arbitrarily, but that it is "the form of His necessary existence." Why could God not issue a decree to elect particular persons, then, as a "form of His necessary existence"? Nevin argues that it would be erroneous to say that God could not have created the world otherwise than how He did because that would exclude all freedom and bind God to necessity." Is Nevin not binding God to his own sense of necessity by denying the possibility of the doctrine of particular election?

Fourthly, Nevin sees God's decrees as absolute and conditional.²³ This is different from Calvin who held that God's decrees are unconditional and that not only has God decreed who will be saved, but likewise all the means to that end of repentance, regeneration, sanctification, etc., and that these elements are so certain there can be no other outcome. In contrast Nevin says, "This destroys the idea of freedom, and is fatalism in germ." "Human liberty requires that there should be actions which are independent even of foreknowledge in an unerring wisdom. There must be actions which are beyond all calculations."²⁴ God's decrees, Nevin says, are intended to apply to the whole and only to some degree are conditional. If His decrees are unconditional, then secondary causes, Nevin says, are phantoms.

²¹ Ibid., 146.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 147.

It may be too crude to summarize Nevin as saying that God established boundaries or launched the human race in a certain direction, and within those confines or contained in the human race generally as it moves toward a goal, humans are free to do as they please – whether to seek and unpack the immanent end of salvation or to ignore and resist it. So Nevin can say that

the salvation of the elect is conditioned by certain relations and conditions which are included in the general contents of the whole decree. The decree itself is immanent, but the results are conditioned by relations in the plan. This makes the salvation not the result of man's doings, because all the results are in the end included in the idea of God and in His general decree. The world is so constituted that it becomes very natural that some are saved and others lost.²⁵

This makes salvation depend on arbitrary actions of the human will. How is it that Nevin is uncomfortable with what seems arbitrary to him in God, but is willing to justify it in humans as the warrant for their salvation? Edwards demonstrated that a truly virtuous act comes from a virtuous nature. No human who is organically bound to Adam from birth is born with a virtuous nature. No truly arbitrary selection on the part of man to cooperate with God is born out of a virtuous nature.

It seems Nevin is saying that the natural world is configured in such a way as to lead some to salvation and others to perdition. Perhaps that is reading too much into what he says, but if he is going to credit God with the salvation of those who will be saved because of how the original decree launched the world and played out in time and space, it is not much of a stretch to conclude that God manipulates the world to insure that some will use their free will to choose salvation (but somehow not of necessity) while others will not encounter the same stimulus to choose salvation.

Nevin is right to recognize that there is mystery in these matters, but he goes too far in trying to resolve the tension between what appears to him to be a contradiction in the Scriptures between God's sovereignty and the appeal to humans as moral agents to respond to the Gospel. He wants to hold both sides in tension, but he is very determined to preserve the sovereignty of the human will.

In class Nevin introduced his students to supralapsarianism (i.e., God's purpose in creating the world was to demonstrate His infinite perfection in the salvation of the elect and the condemning of the reprobate) and sublapsarianism (God issued decrees of election and reprobation as with supralapsarianism, but here those decrees were issued only on the basis of foreknowledge – of God looking ahead in time to see what human moral agents would do before He issued His decrees). He rejected supralapsarianism as fatalistic, associating it with

²⁵ Ibid.

Hegelianism which made sin necessary for human development and the fall necessary for virtue. Later he says, "it is against His [God's] whole character to have created a portion of the human family for eternal damnation."²⁶ He rejected sublapsarianism as inconsistent and arbitrary leading to pantheism and fatalism.²⁷ Instead he preferred a position between the two.

He held that both views placed God outside the world and not within it in a free and immanent way. (But what could be more immanent than God orchestrating all the events of history in order to insure the salvation of the elect?) The fall, he taught, was neither necessary by reason of the constitution of the world or by divine decree. Instead it was the result of man's free choice.

Yet he rejected the Arminian view which presents God's decrees as conditional and dependent on the foresight of man's actions. God foresaw but did not decree Adam's fall and so in consequence decreed to send His Son to suffer and die for those God saw beforehand would believe. The Arminian view limits the knowledge of God and places actions in the moral world beyond God's control.²⁸

While Edwards was hard to understand because of the detailed parsing out of his philosophical and theological ideas, Nevin is difficult to understand because he attempted to construct a fragile system that held various seemingly opposed truths together, sometimes giving the impression that he was contradicting himself. He cited numerous Scriptures to prove the doctrine of election is taught in Scripture (Romans 8 and 9; Ephesians 1:5 and others), and by election he meant, "that God has chosen some men to salvation in preference to others."²⁹ While admitting that the Scriptures teach an election of grace which does not rest on personal qualifications, he says that the bestowing of grace is not completely arbitrary. There must be some previous qualifications in a person who is chosen for an office. As illustrations, he offers that the mother of Jesus had to be Mary and could not have been another. The Apostle John could not have played the part of Paul. Mary was chosen for her role because she was specially fitted for it.³⁰ This seems to be what he meant when he spoke of God's general decree which set many elements in motion to produce His goals in the end. In like manner, then, "Out of a foresight of certain qualifications God chose some to life eternal."³¹

If it were possible to ask Nevin questions, perhaps one would want to inquire whether this theory does not limit God's freedom. Could He not choose whomever He wanted to accomplish His will and overcome any natural or moral inabilities in the subject? Nevin's theory unfolds as he points out that built into the

²⁶ Ibid., 162.

²⁷ Ibid., 148.

²⁸ Ibid., 150.

²⁹ Ibid., 151.

³⁰ Ibid., 151-152.

³¹ Ibid., 152.

constitution of the world is the necessity of differences and distinctions. People experience difference of providence. "The permission to be born in a heathen land or in a Christian, or to be born in a particular family with favorable advantages, is just as much an election to eternal life." Nevin sees election to earthly circumstances running directly into election concerning eternal matters, but the ground of these distinctions "lies in the necessity or constitution of the world."³²

Having been led to believe up to this point that Nevin promoted the sovereignty of the human will, one must rethink his opinion upon reading that "if the created will was absolute, separate and independent, we cannot see how a general plan could hold in the world. The world being an organism, bound together in all its parts, nothing in it can or dare be uncertain."³³ If man's will was sovereign, the outcome of the universe would be in a constant state of flux. As difficult as it is to grasp, Nevin gave the solution that "the actions of the particular will are included in the divine plan or will." Perhaps what is intended here is a collaborative effort wherein the freedom of both are preserved, although he presents the whole world as directly dependent on God.³⁴

Nevin stated that the decree of election is eternal. The decision is not dependent on a person's qualifications but is not capricious or arbitrary either. It is rooted in some reason in God's mind which is not revealed. From His own secret counsel, God may choose some who appear less desirable than others who will be left in their sins. All are equally dead in sin, but not all are equally disposed to make use of the means of grace.³⁵ "Some persons," he said, "are predisposed and naturally addicted to sin, others are constitutionally inclined to morality." It is the latter group Nevin assumes would be more susceptible to religious influences.³⁶ Yet reading the Old Testament, one certainly does not see that the Jewish people who had many advantages were more inclined to be influenced by religious things. Instead one finds that all are equally inclined away from God. Would Nevin acknowledge that all are spiritually dead, but some are a little more undead than others and so able to respond to the offer of the Gospel?

He held that grace does not transfer at birth but a predisposition to grace may. Nevin's organic ideas applied to election make interpretation of Scripture strained. He said, "Our birth in a Christian land, our education, our position in society, where we are subjected to moral influences, are all included and implied in what Christ said, 'No man cometh to me, except the Father draw him.'"³⁷ But what of those in Scripture who had none of these things yet readily believed in

³² Ibid., 152.

³³ Ibid., 153.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 154-155.

³⁶ Ibid., 155.

³⁷ Ibid.

Christ? Is God's act of drawing not more personal and particular than Nevin acknowledges?

In a subsequent section on reprobation the following quote is contained: "The nature of man's actions, however, is to a great extent the result of his relations with the world, and depends finally upon the general plan." And, "The general plan underlies all things and relations, and presupposes a free knowledge on the part of God, yet the result must be regarded as the product of the general human will."³⁸ Those statements form a fitting summary of Nevin's theory. In his attempt to preserve human freedom and vindicate God as just according to standards of human reason, Nevin relied on a layer of secondary causes said to be infused with God's immanence and wisdom to accomplish His goal for creation. Yet his attempt failed to show how his theory made God any more immanent than in the supralapsarian view where God is immanent in creation saving the elect. He also failed to demonstrate how it can be that man acts only partially out of necessity or how the organic theories of the universe keep from running into abstract commands and fatalism according to Nevin's own designations. He failed to depict properly grace triumphing over nature and instead gives the impression it is somehow bound by it. Nevin came short of explaining why if God were free to decree nature into existence as a servant to accomplish His plans, the transcendent God would not be free to decree grace that works both through and above nature to save sinners.

In the end Nevin acknowledged that those who emphasize God's sovereignty believe in a God who created part of humanity to be lost. On the other hand, those who stress human free agency risk losing the idea that all are dependent on God for salvation. Nevin's desire was to fall between these two views.³⁹

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³⁸ Ibid., 160.

³⁹ Ibid., 163.