

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

By [Rev. Joel Kletzing](#)

CHAPTER SIX (cont.)

Reflections on Religious Affections

There could hardly be found a fuller, wiser, more useful text which challenges Christians to examine themselves and to turn to God for grace to produce genuine affections within them than *Religious Affections*. Jonathan Edwards defended the teaching that Adam's corruption spread to all people and that only in Christ is justification available, certainly not through any obedience on our part. However, if Adam's sin brought to the entire human race, both condemnation and corruption, then would not a participation in Christ not only free one from condemnation but also corruption? Certainly Edwards would generally agree that it does. But there were numerous times in the masterful work where a promotion of participation in the humanity of Christ as the source for truly gracious affections would have brought clarity. Instead, there was talk about partaking of love or of God's spiritual beauty and holiness, and the Holy Spirit being a new life principle within the believer and establishing union with God. Certainly those elements of the Christian faith are indisputable. But without a focus on participation in Christ, the believer is given numerous true and helpful counsels without the central, uniting focal point of the wonder of the incarnation and the new source of humanity opened for us after the resurrection which is Jesus to whom believers are as organically connected as they are to Adam.

P. Y. DeJong wrote that he believed Edwards turned away from organic connectionalism of earlier federal theology and favored instead individualistic piety.¹ He did not adopt a view of organic union with Adam. Instead he held to a divinely constituted conveyance of original sin. It was a sovereign act and not a consequence of organic union.²

Edwards' work was not devoid of emphases on union with Christ. William Evans observed that Edwards referred to both vital/ spiritual union and relative/legal

¹ Evans, 88, footnote.

² Ibid., 101.

union to describe two aspects of union with Christ.³ What he virtually ignored was the earlier focus of Calvin and some Puritan theology on union with Christ's humanity. Edwards' focus was on union with the divine. The significance of Christ's humanity to Edwards was that it facilitated His active and passive obedience and enabled revelation of God. Thus the limelight falls on the Holy Spirit in *Religious Affections*.⁴ Grace for Edwards did not flow organically from Christ but was immediate. Thus divine constitution is responsible for present human identity. His emphasis on immediate, uncreated grace moved him away from the sacraments as a means of grace.⁵ The elements of the Lord's Supper, in Edwards' view, were only meant to symbolize Christ and did not signify His real presence. However, they were to be regarded as real ambassadors from Him sent to extend invitation and assurance of love.⁶

Nevin spoke of actual insertion into Christ Himself, of being joined to Christ mystically by the Holy Spirit, and that the result of being inserted into Christ's life includes all the benefits of salvation – or in this case all proper religious affections. “Christ is in the believer and the believer is in Christ; not by a moral relationship simply, and not by a legal connection only; but by the bond of a common life.”⁷ Anything less than this, Nevin says, is tending toward rationalism. The power that Edwards was promoting for a truly godly life is actually supplied through organic union with the God-man, and all spiritual guidance should funnel toward dependence on Christ and partaking of Him. If the Holy Spirit facilitates union with the divine Christ, Nevin asks how Christ can be divided. Would the Holy Spirit not create union with the whole Christ, including His humanity? For Nevin, the Spirit is “the medium of a new spiritual creation,” a new life in the believer.⁸ For those who focus on the Holy Spirit as bringing truth and new affections and not as bringing new life from Christ Nevin asks, “Is it an absolute creation out of nothing; a higher order of existence, including no organic, historical connection whatever with any law of life already at hand?”⁹ That would make every believer a new creation, but not necessarily a new creation in Christ. Nevin insists, “Christ does dwell in us by his Spirit; but only as his Spirit constitutes the very form and power of his own presence as the incarnate and everlasting Word.” What the Spirit creates in believers is not out of nothing, “but the very life of Jesus himself, organically continued in this way over into our persons.”¹⁰ “Humanity is never complete,” the Mercersburg theologian wrote, “till it reaches his person.” “Our nature reaches after a true and real union with the nature of God, as the necessary complement and consummation of its own

³ Ibid., 95.

⁴ Ibid., 99.

⁵ Ibid., 111-112.

⁶ Ibid., 112, footnote.

⁷ Nevin, 181.

⁸ Ibid., 183.

⁹ Ibid., 184.

¹⁰ Ibid., 185.

life.”¹¹ Considering this truth then pulls together the wealth of wisdom contained in *Religious Affections* and grants a unifying focal point that lends power and comfort to the believer’s pursuit of genuine Christian faith and life. As Nevin said, “The whole morality of the gospel is made to root itself in the presence and power of the new life, thus derived from Christ.”¹²

Conclusion

Both Edwards and Nevin felt the push and pull, the turbulent upheaval of religious controversy in their respective eras. They combatted what they saw as error, and when compared with each other, offered unique contributions to the wellbeing and maturity of the church. When elements of both are combined, the result can be a rich feast for those who wish to grow in Christ. The wise, subjective, practical and Biblical insights of Edwards combined with the more objective-leaning and notably Christ-exalting insights of Nevin form a more complete picture of what it means to be in Christ.

Reaching back to the twelfth century, one finds an example of many of the rich beneficial elements of both Edwards and Nevin combined in a Cistercian monk named Bernard of Clairvaux. One of his works, “On Loving God,” written between 1125 and 1141, obviously dealt with religious affections as the title notes. His work highlighted the full sovereignty of God’s initiative to bring persons to Himself as Edwards would have taught. And his work highlighted the centrality of Christ as the Source for all that is godly within the believer in a way it seems Nevin would have approved. It is a work of peaceful simplicity. A brief summary of “On Loving God” is presented here in the hopes that after all the struggle over details in the previous pages, one might quietly enter a harbor where harmony between the differing perspectives is realized, and there is fresh assurance that in the midst of upheaval, Christ’s victory over human error and Satan’s counterfeit activity is sure.

Bernard begins by stating that “The cause of loving God is God himself” and “God is to be loved for his own sake.”¹³ God is to be loved because He deserves it and for the good of the lover as well. He deserves to be loved because He gave Himself for sinners who did not deserve His love.

The soul is the higher part of the self. It houses dignity, knowledge and virtue. Man’s dignity is his free will which distinguishes him as superior to animals. His knowledge is his recognition or self-awareness of his dignity and that that dignity does not originate from within himself. His virtue is when he seeks eagerly for his Creator and holds to Him when found. Dignity is nothing without knowledge

¹¹ Ibid., 188.

¹² Ibid., 206.

¹³ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, trans. Gillian R. Evans, *Selected Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 174.

which in itself can be a stumbling block if virtue is absent. Without virtue, dignity and knowledge would steal glory that belongs only to God. Each person, even among unbelievers, bears an inborn sense of justice which testifies that God is owed everything by the individual.¹⁴ The faithful are those who humbly recognize their need of Jesus and Him crucified.¹⁵

Bernard uses imagery of the Bridegroom visiting the Bride (believers) as the key to realizing joy. He writes, “The heavenly Bridegroom takes such pleasure in these fragrances that he comes often and willingly to the chamber of the heart in which he finds such fruits piled up and such flowers strewn.”¹⁶ The fragrances mentioned are reflections on the grace of the Passion and the glory of the resurrection. The Bride is pictured as so concerned as to adorn herself that when the Bridegroom visits the couch of her heart it produces such sweet fragrance.¹⁷

The monk quotes Sirach (34:29) with reference to the Bridegroom – “He who eats me will hunger for more.” He continues, “the faithful soul sighs deeply for his presence and rests peacefully in the thought of him,” glorying in the cross until the fullness of glory dawns. “Even when she [the Bride] has fallen wholly in love she thinks she loves too little because she is loved so much.”¹⁸

Bernard’s focus is on mystical union with the divine-human Christ, and he celebrates Christ’s initiative in salvation with these words referring to creation and new creation, “In the first act he gave me myself; in the second he gave himself; and when he did that he gave me back myself. Given and given again, I owe myself in return for myself, twice over.”¹⁹

“God is not loved without reward, even though he should be loved without thought of reward.”²⁰ True love is content because it has its reward in what it loves. The soul that truly loves God will ask for no other reward but Him. If it seeks something else as a reward for loving God, then it loves that other entity and not God.²¹

Bernard is clear that “God is the cause of loving God.” He is both the efficient cause and the final cause. He provides occasion, creates longing, fulfills the desire, causes Himself to be made “such that he should be loved.” “His love both prepares and rewards ours.” “He is riches to all who call upon him.” He addresses God thus, “Lord, you are good to the soul which seeks you. What are

¹⁴ Ibid., 177-178.

¹⁵ Ibid., 179.

¹⁶ Ibid., 180.

¹⁷ Ibid., 181.

¹⁸ Ibid., 182-184.

¹⁹ Ibid., 186.

²⁰ Ibid., 187.

²¹ Ibid., 188.

you then to the soul which finds? But this is the most wonderful thing, that no one can seek you who has not already found you.”²²

Four degrees of love are enumerated. The first is “when man loves himself for his own sake.”²³ This type of love is natural and normal but can easily overflow its bounds and become sinful. It must be contained by the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself. In order to deny self in this way, one must trust God to supply needs. In his natural state man does not know how to love anything besides himself. But as he learns that in God and only in God he can do all things good, he begins to love God for his own benefit. That is the second degree of love – “when man loves God for his own good.”²⁴ God’s generosity softens the heart and begins to change motives.

The third degree of love is “when man loves God for God’s sake.”²⁵ Man’s frequent need drives him to God often, and through that frequent contact with God he learns how sweet God is. “It is in this way that the taste of his own sweetness leads us to love God in purity more than our need alone would prompt us to do.” “He who trusts in the Lord not because he is good to him but simply because he is good truly loves God for God’s sake and not for his own.”²⁶

The fourth degree has a misleading title. It is “when man loves himself for the sake of God.” It refers to when “man loves himself only for God’s sake.”²⁷ In other words, one will never be free of self-love or self-interest but will become refined and engage in it in a way that glorifies God who made him. Here Bernard describes a type of love where “the mind, drunk with divine love and forgetting itself, making itself like a broken vessel, throws itself wholly on God and, clinging to God, becomes one with him in spirit.”²⁸ Bernard sought a mystical encounter with God where one was emptied of self. He explains that there is no ultimate satisfaction in the fulfilling of personal needs. What truly satisfies is when God’s will is fulfilled in believers. As a drop of water added to wine assumes its properties, or as molten iron becomes indistinguishable from the fire heating it, as air on a clear day is infused with the sun’s light, so in a holy person the affections are dissolved into God’s will. The ultimate fulfillment of this hope will come to fruition at the resurrection. None of this is obtainable by mere human effort. God gives it as He wills.²⁹ In a letter attached as an appendix Bernard wrote, “Love truly converts souls because it makes them willing.”³⁰

²² Ibid., 191.

²³ Ibid., 192.

²⁴ Ibid., 193.

²⁵ Ibid., 194.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 195.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 196.

³⁰ Ibid., 201.

So may our Lord continue to work graciously to create holy affections which spring from sharing the very life of Christ, that the church may be kept from error and finally come to maturity facilitated by the Holy Spirit.

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