

## 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 SEVEN (cont.)

##### The Ten Commandments

Thomas Watson (c. 1620-1686) was one of the most popular preachers in London during the Puritan era. In 1692 he published *The Ten Commandments*. In his introduction he began by explaining obedience. “Obedience without knowledge is blind, and knowledge without obedience is lame.”<sup>1</sup> This Biblical truth demonstrates continuity with the later philosophically-oriented concept found in Nevin about the importance of wedding both will and understanding in terms of love for God and obtaining a grasp of truth in each respectively.

Watson offers the insight that obedience which is not offered freely and cheerfully is actually penance. Hypocrites are those who render obedience grudgingly. For example, Cain gave a sacrifice but not his heart. So, “what the heart does not do, is not done.”<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Jehu purged Baal worshipers and thus accomplished good, but since his aim was not God’s glory, he was treated as a murderer (Hosea 1:4). Though a child of God may fall short, his aim is to be the glory of God. It is not a believer’s obedience that is acceptable to God but Christ’s merit. Watson wrote, “In every part of worship we must present Christ to God in the arms of faith.”<sup>3</sup> To offer obedience to God that is not (to use Nevin’s terms) organically rooted in Christ would be as displeasing to God as Uzziah offering incense without a priest (2 Chronicles 26:20).

Recalling material above from Nevin’s writings and the work that the Holy Spirit must do to cause the understanding and will to recognize the goodness of God’s will and to desire it, Watson describes the type of thinking that God’s grace will produce in one being made holy. Sin begins to appear irrational because it cuts the believer off from God. God commands nothing unreasonable. Sin invites danger to health and destruction to the soul. There is love in every command

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, rpt. 2009), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

from God, as if a king had commanded his servants to dig a gold mine and keep the treasure for themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Watson defines love as “a holy fire kindled in the affections, whereby a Christian is carried out strongly after God as the supreme good.”<sup>5</sup> He also says that in order for love to exist the Spirit must first illumine understanding so it can recognize the beauty of God’s wisdom, holiness and mercy. Such love is extended toward God because of who He is, and not merely because of the benefits He offers. And if one loves God he will love the ordinances God has established and regard them as “the glass where the glory of God is resplendent.” “In the ordinances we meet with him whom our souls love.”<sup>6</sup> One who truly loves God cannot find contentment in anything without Him and hates whatever separates from God. Another sign of genuine love for God is the tendency to broadcast His praises, pointing out to others His loveliness.<sup>7</sup> This quality of love is very careful and attentive to details in the law, being willing to suffer for the sake of allegiance to God’s commands. Yet only grace can cause a heart to love God. Since by nature humans have no love to God, it must be His initiative of extending love that is the cause of all love returning to Him.<sup>8</sup> It is fitting to pray for God to grant a heart to love Him.

In examining the words prefacing the Ten Commandments, “I am the Lord thy God,” Watson establishes that God possesses the requisite wisdom and authority to decree law. He demonstrates His goodness in that He has not left humanity without law. The law cannot justify, but it serves to instruct.<sup>9</sup> A constant danger to the human soul is idols. “Dry wood is not more prone to take fire than our nature is to idolatry.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore God’s law is a true blessing to identify what sin is so Christ may be sought as its remedy.

Watson joins Marshall in condemning “formal Protestants” who fall into the same category as seduced papists, Jews, Turks, and other heathen bound for hell.<sup>11</sup> One can hope that his comments were not condemning form as if it can never appropriately express true holiness and godly spirituality. Certainly empty form without engaging the heart should be condemned. To begin to understand the Puritan logic that stirred such aversion to form, the context of struggle against a corrupt Roman church must be considered. Under his section on the Second Commandment Watson wrote that “Superstition is bringing any ceremony, fancy, or innovation into God’s worship, which he never appointed,” as if God were not

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 5, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 43.

wise enough to determine how He should be worshipped.<sup>12</sup> The suspicion of form was borne out of a desire to honor God's commands carefully.

With Marshall, Watson agrees that moral law requires obedience but gives no strength to fulfill it. Only the Gospel gives strength and bestows faith on the elect and sweetens the law, making service a delight. In confronting antinomianism Watson effectively argued, "They who will not have the law to rule them, shall never have the gospel to save them."<sup>13</sup>

Watson helpfully lists criteria for what he calls an evangelical sense of keeping the commandments. In other words, there is still a way to render proper fulfillment of the law even though in this lifetime no one can keep it perfectly. First, effort must be made to honor all commands. Second, there must be an inward desire to be obedient. Third, failing should awaken grief. Fourth, diligent application must be made to obedience. Fifth, there must be trust in Christ's blood to cleanse the imperfect service rendered.<sup>14</sup>

In the final segment of this work is a description of man's original state. Adam was created in a state of innocence, with the ability to keep the whole moral law, possessing "rectitude of mind, sanctity of will, and perfection of power," with a copy of God's law written on his heart.<sup>15</sup> After the fall, he retained neither the power nor the will to keep the moral law. Nor can a regenerate person keep the law perfectly. This is why Aaron had to make sacrifices to make atonement for the altar for even the sacrifices offered on it were defiled. Thus Watson points out that all Arminian arguments are disproven because of the ruined state of man.<sup>16</sup> Free will cannot exist in man's natural state.

In reading Watson's description of the wrath of God and being reminded of truths such as "To be deprived of the sight of God is the greatest of all punishments,"<sup>17</sup> the thoughts of Nevin come to mind as he spoke of salvation in terms of particular life becoming whole and complete by finding itself in union with general life which springs from God. Nevin's ideas magnify the sense of loss and unfulfilled emptiness for unbelievers while Watson's increase the picture of wrath. Watson depicts wrath as seizing every part of the unrepentant sinner in his or her entirety. Never again will the eyes see beauty or the ears hear music. It makes sense as Watson says that there will never be a moment's reprieve from the experience of wrath, because as Nevin indicated, the soul would be cut off from real life, so finding satisfaction would be impossible.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 185-186.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 195.

As the Puritans were more apt to focus on conversion than Nevin was, Watson includes a practical evaluation of repentance. Entering union with God is not something into which one is educated or into which one merely drifts. Watson lists counterfeits of God-given repentance which include the following: a natural softness and tenderness of spirit; legal terrors such as those Judas experienced; a slight, superficial sorrow (e.g., tearing one's clothes instead of the heart); good motions rising in the heart that are religious (recall Herod's good motions when he was stirred by John the Baptist's preaching, yet he did not yield to repentance); vows and resolutions, perhaps bargaining with God seeking deliverance from a danger in exchange for repentance; and curbing a gross sin (again thinking of Herod who amended some sinful ways but retained Herodias).<sup>18</sup> Seeing that there are so many fraudulent varieties of repentance, it is appropriate to ask God for a truly penitent heart.<sup>19</sup>

Watson emphasizes the role of the written Word of God as a tool for the Spirit to produce transformation. While Nevin recognized the Bible as God's authoritative Word, his reliance on philosophical sources shows that at least in practice he believed that sanctification could be helped by knowledge gained from supplemental sources as well.

Watson saw baptism as a sign and seal of engrafting into Christ.<sup>20</sup> For the elect it is a true seal of the righteousness accessed by faith. Children who are baptized come under a more special providential care of Christ who appoints angels to guard them. Against those who deny baptism should be granted to infants, he argues that Christ did not come to put believers and their children in worse condition than those of the Old Testament, for those of the Old Testament were included under God's covenant care. Further, if children in infancy are capable of grace, they should be eligible for baptism.<sup>21</sup>

Just like the atonement can be found in Nevin's works but is not the prominent feature, so the Puritans are not known for a high view of the sacraments, but repeatedly the subject of mystical union and Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper surfaces in their writings. Watson said, "In prayer, we draw nigh to God; in the sacraments, we become one with him." "Christ in both natures, God and man, is the matter of this supper."<sup>22</sup> Eating points to the mystical union between Christ and the saints, a real participation in His merits and graces.<sup>23</sup> And he lobbies for frequent observance of the Lord's Supper as an antidote that cancels out the poison of sin.<sup>24</sup> Whereas Nevin would speak of an objective presence of Christ and grace in the sacraments which are only made good for those with

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 210-211.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 219-220.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 229.

subjective faith and desire, Watson said that “Faith makes Christ present to the soul. The believer has a real presence in the sacrament.”<sup>25</sup> So it seems Puritanism leaned toward favoring the subjective as that which lends weight to the Lord’s Supper.

Lastly, Watson concludes his work by lending practical insight into the role of prayer in sanctification. Since 1 Thessalonians 4:3 reveals sanctification to be the will of God for His people, and prayers are to be made according to God’s will, it is appropriate to pray for sanctification. But he warns, “Formality starves prayer.”<sup>26</sup> Such statements provide more targets for the later Mercersburg theologians who when confronting nearly formless revivalism would come to the defense of form, claiming that without form abstract, spiritual realities would not be truly realized.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 241.