

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 EIGHT

Will the Real Church Please Stand Up?

During the mid-nineteenth century at the German Reformed Seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, the two resident professors, Philip Schaff and John Williamson Nevin, sharply criticized the Puritan movement, particularly in regard to the Puritan view of the church. Upon closer examination it becomes clear that Nevin and Schaff were reacting more specifically to the New England brand of Puritanism which sprang from the successive generations after Jonathan Edwards. The professors steeped in German philosophy argued against runaway subjectivism destroying American Protestantism in their day, creating chaos and causing congregations to become an independent law unto themselves, arrogantly rejecting the value of church history so as to exalt themselves as finally the proper version of what it means to be the church for the first time since the time of the Apostles.

While the earlier Puritans from the British Isles of the seventeenth century obviously could not argue against opponents who would not be born for several generations yet to come, they did argue against an oppressively objective Church of England which, they claimed, stifled all properly subjective expressions of worship and polity, enforcing a unity within the church which included elements not found in the Bible. It seemed to them that in order to keep from violating their consciences that the only option was to secede from the established church and develop congregations free to follow the Bible as they understood it. At first glance it appears they fall into the category Mercersburg condemned under the despised label of Puritan.

Mercersburg had a mediating dynamic in its reasoning. When weighing the struggle between the objective and subjective elements of Christianity and what it means to be the church, it concluded that the perfection of both was often the unifying of both. Both can be done poorly and become oppressive to members.

In order to begin to grasp the dynamics of Puritan arguments against formalist worship and church structure, some knowledge of their respective contexts is necessary. That of three prominent seventeenth-century Puritans and then of John Williamson Nevin are here introduced with an attempt to afford a glimpse into their ecclesiology and the ground from which it sprang.

John Flavel

John Flavel (1628-1691) grew up in the home of a pastor. His father Richard preached in London, and one day in 1665 during a sermon soldiers with drawn swords entered the building and carried away both of John's parents as prisoners to Newgate where they contracted the plague and died in their confinement. Both John and his brother Phinehas became pastors. John was the oldest and was born in Worcestershire. His father schooled him, and then he attended Oxford where he did well and proved to be a hard worker. In 1650 he was called to assist an elderly pastor in Diptford in the county of Devon. He gained respect as he ministered in that community. Six months later he was ordained by the presbytery when it met in Salisbury (October 17, 1650). When the elderly Mr. Wolpate died, John succeeded him as pastor.

He married Jane Randal who died in childbirth with their first child. After a year of mourning, at the urging of friends, he married Elizabeth Morris. The pastor at Dartmouth died, and John was called there to shepherd that flock. In that parish he had an associate, and the duty of preaching was split between them. His ministry was blessed in that God produced conversions. He was well read and able to engage the debates of his day even though he did not care for controversies. He was known to be devoted to prayer.

When the Act of Uniformity of 1662 passed by Parliament sought to impose uniform directions for worship, Flavel was among 2,000 pastors who would not conform and thus were ejected from their pulpits. However, he continued to preach and administer the sacraments in private meetings, joining with other ministers also to fast and pray. After his pastoral colleague Allein Geere died, he shouldered the entire responsibility of caring for the flock in Dartmouth. When Parliament banished non-conformist pastors to stay at least five miles away from any towns, members of his congregation followed after him weeping.

In Slapton God provided for him, and he preached twice each Lord's Day. All the while he privately slipped back into Dartmouth at times to preach and speak with his people, exercising caution so as not to be detected by the adversaries who were constantly on the lookout for him. There is an account where a meeting he was holding was raided, and the people protected him and reconvened in another secret location, even though several of their number had been arrested and fined as a result of the raid on the initial gathering. After King Charles II granted liberty Flavel returned to Dartmouth to preach openly.

At this point in his life his second wife died. She had been a great help to him since he was said to be “a man of an infirm and weak constitution.”¹ He then married Ann Downe who was daughter of the minister of Exeter. The persecution waged against nonconformists drove him to London. Before he set sail, he had a dream that informed him trouble would be coming, and he then encountered a storm at sea off the coast of Portland that caused the veteran sailors to give up all hope of surviving. Flavel called all hands available to the cabin for prayer. A part of John’s prayer was an argument offered to God that if he died, his enemies would blaspheme and say that while they did not kill John, God did. Immediately the wind changed, and a sailor exclaimed that God hears prayer. They arrived safely in London. While there he married his fourth wife who was a widow and also a minister’s daughter.

In London he was almost captured in a raid on a meeting where one of his associates, Mr. Jenkins, was taken. Mr. Jenkins died in prison. Eventually Flavel returned to Dartmouth where he continued to meet secretly with his parishioners. Finally in 1687 King James II relaxed the regulations against the nonconformists and freedom was restored.

Flavel engaged in much self-examination, asking the Lord to grant him the Holy Spirit so that the true state of his heart might be known. Particularly he was on the lookout for dangerous self-love as he sought to keep himself in a state of preparation for judgment day. Sincerity produced a powerful quality in his sermons since he spoke from his own heart directly to others’ hearts. “He preached what he felt, what he had handled, what he had seen and tasted of the word of life, and they felt it also.”²

John Owen

John Owen was born in 1616 to Henry Owen who was vicar of Stadham in Oxfordshire. Henry was a godly, committed minister who labored for reform and was branded with the title of Puritan which was a pejorative label in that day. Not much is known of John’s childhood and nothing of his mother who was responsible for his early training. He likely received instruction from his father which prepared him to enroll in a private academy in Oxford to engage in classical studies. At the unusually young age of twelve he entered Queen’s College.

While there he allowed himself only four hours per night of sleep and engaged in vigorous exercise and musical instruction. He would later confess that his motives at that early stage in his development were poor in that he sought

¹ “The Life of the Late Rev. Mr. John Flavel, Minister of Dartmouth,” *The Works of John Flavel*, vol. 1, rpt. (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), viii.

² *Ibid.*, xii.

advantages which could advance him in distinction and power within the church. The content of his learning, however, would be used by the Holy Spirit to transform his heart.

William Laud became chancellor of Oxford, and he instituted innovations which actually favored to some degree a return to Roman Catholicism. The new chancellor took a hardline approach which set the stage for division. Owen would oppose such dogma and maintained that only what Jesus instituted should be employed in worship. Human additions should not be admitted into the liturgy and especially not enforced as mandatory. His position would later result in his exit from Oxford at age 21 only to return ten years later to a position of authority there. Owen served as a chaplain and tutor within the family of Sir Robert Dormer of Ascot and later to the family of Lord Lovelace of Hurly in Berkshire.

Eventually Parliament revolted against King Charles and civil war ensued. It was natural for Owen to side with Parliament. He moved to London and while there battled depression. On one occasion he went to hear the popular Presbyterian preacher Dr. Edmund Calamy at Aldesmanbury Chapel, but an unknown country preacher spoke in his place that day. Owen's companion suggested they duck out to hear another more accomplished preacher instead. However, they chose to remain, and the sermon was based on Matthew 8:26 – "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" God used this sermon to bring Owen peace.

He began publishing in 1642 and soon thereafter entered the pastorate at Fordham in Essex where he was well loved and the ministry fruitful. There he married a Miss Rooke. Mrs. Owen gave birth to eleven children, but all except one daughter failed to survive childhood. That daughter had an unsuccessful marriage, after which she returned home and also died.

One of his works was entitled *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished*. In it he urged people to take responsibility for their own growth, but he denounced those who would promote wild democracy in the church and attempt to make "all the Lord's people prophets."³ Such behavior would downgrade the office of pastor and strip it of authority. He sought to harmonize authority and liberty in the church.

On April 29, 1646 he was invited to preach to Parliament at their monthly fast. His giftedness became better known, and he was called to lead a more mature congregation in Coggeshall in Essex. It was there that he renounced Presbyterianism and embraced the Congregational way. However, for Owen being an independent was a different matter than it was for the later Americans who identified as the same in the nineteenth century who lacked high regard for the church as Nevin described in his experiences of them.

³ Andrew Thomson, *Life of John Owen, D.D.* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1853), 30.

Owen's brand of congregationalism retained the office of ruling elder and a proper regard for the importance of synods. Presbyterians, he believed, involved themselves too much in secular power. They grew troubled by the increasing liberty of thought in society and feared toleration of it would defeat the truth. They lived in fear of growing moral and spiritual darkness.

Owen's biographer Andrew Thomson wrote, "Owen's mind had, meanwhile far advanced beyond these narrow views, and risen above these imaginary fears. He had boundless confidence in the vitality of truth, -- strong convictions of the power of its own spiritual weapons, and of the utter impotence of every other."⁴ He spoke to Parliament opposing the use of the sword to punish heresy, promoting spiritual solutions instead of beheading. He publicly resisted forced conformity. The "Discourse on Toleration" he presented to Parliament explained his opinion that the civil magistrate should only intervene in matters of religion if aberrant beliefs truly brought harm upon the civil society.⁵ His view was not his own invention but was similar to the magisterial reformer Zwingli and also to the Presbyterian Church of Holland at the time.

Richard Baxter, a contemporary of Owen, reported that he saw in most independent churches of his day serious holiness and discipline.⁶ Owen's preaching caught the attention of Cromwell who insisted that he become chaplain for an invading force into Ireland to avenge the blood of the one hundred thousand Protestants killed there and to put down the rebellion that had erupted against the newly established commonwealth.

After Cromwell was appointed chancellor at Oxford, he nominated Owen to serve as Vice Chancellor. While Puritans were caricatured negatively, Owen and the best of the Independents were notably respectable men, highly regarded as leaders and scholars. Oxford flourished under Owen's leadership. He showed grace to Episcopalians who wished to gather and practice their own liturgy. He demonstrated a conciliatory demeanor toward Presbyterians, befriending them and appointing them to positions. He was called upon to participate in talks to unify Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists. When appointed by Cromwell to serve on a committee which examined candidates for ordination, Owen opposed those in sympathy with Roman Catholics and Arminianism. Along with his good friend Thomas Goodwin, another Independent who was president of Magdalen College, he received the Doctor of Divinity degree.

Owen's support of Cromwell he assumed was synonymous with supporting liberty. But when Parliament suggested making Cromwell king, and Cromwell actually considered it, Owen opposed the idea, and he began to fall from favor with Cromwell which would mean being removed from public positions such as the one at Oxford.

⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁶ Ibid., 36.

The Savoy Assembly produced the Savoy Declaration, an amended version of the Westminster Confession of Faith to reflect the congregational position. Owen was the key contributor to this work. There was a concern to produce a fitting confession in order to guard against aberrant theological positions attaching themselves to the category of Independent. Two hundred men participated in the assembly with Cromwell's approval. The shared confession would provide grounds upon which churches of sound faith and order could enjoy communion with each other.

His work "Of Schism; the true nature of it discovered, and considered with reference to the present differences in religion" defended Independents against the charge of being schismatic, maintaining that separation from a church was not always necessarily schismatic. Actually, he argued, a church that becomes so corrupt and tyrannical that it leaves no choice but separation for those it oppresses, that body should be charged with schism.

After Cromwell's death on September 3, 1658, the country was tired of turmoil, and the government sought to reestablish uniformity. Separatists began to fall out of favor. After being removed from the position of dean of Christchurch at Oxford, Owen returned to his native village of Stadham where he shepherded a small flock. When the Act of Uniformity (1662) was passed governmental persecution caused his congregation to disband, but like many other preachers of his day, he continued to minister in secret meetings.

While the prisons filled with nonconformists and exiles fled to find freedom elsewhere, the plague came to London. The clerics who had oppressed the Puritans fled, so Puritan pastors came out of hiding and ministered to the dying and bereaved at great risk to their own wellbeing. Their popularity in the eyes of the people caused Parliament to place even more restrictions on them, making them to be exiles trapped in their own country, sometimes subject to abuse from wild mobs – one of which Owen narrowly escaped.

During the time the Independents and nonconformists were being persecuted in England, the Independents of New England were persecuting even more severely the Baptists and Quakers with whipping, fines, imprisonment, and selling them into slavery. When Owen became aware of that behavior he and his associates in London wrote the following:

We only make it our hearty request that you will trust God with his truth and ways, so far as to suspend all rigorous proceedings in corporal restraints or punishments on persons that dissent from you, and practice the principles of the dissent without danger or disturbance to the civil peace of the place.⁷

⁷ Ibid., 133.

Despite continued persecution sometimes waxing and sometimes waning, King Charles II would invite Owen to meet with him to discuss religious liberty. The embattled preacher tried to use his influence to help the oppressed such as John Bunyan who was imprisoned for preaching without governmental license.

John Owen died August 24, 1683. He had risen to be the chief representative of the Puritans in matters of the rights of conscience and freedom of worship. He championed the supreme authority of Holy Scripture, the headship of Christ over the church, and “religion as a thing of spirit, and not of form.”⁸ With the exception of that last descriptive phrase from his biographer, Owen could successfully evade being the target of Nevin’s disgust and anger directed against American Congregationalists in the mid-1800’s.

Thomas Boston

Thomas Boston was born in Duns, Scotland on March 17, 1676. His family was Presbyterian, and his father, John, was put in Duns prison in 1680 for nonconformity where Thomas stayed with him at least one night. Thomas’ learning progressed swiftly between the ages of eight and thirteen. At age eleven he came alive spiritually under the ministry of Rev. Henry Erskine who also had been ejected from his pulpit in 1662 by the Act of Uniformity. However, when King James relaxed some of the rules, he had come to minister in Whitsome, just a few miles from Duns. Prior to his personal spiritual awakening Thomas had been drawn to the episcopal system. Concurrent with that awakening he identified as Presbyterian.

John recognized in his youngest son a calling to be a pastor, but he could not afford to send Thomas to three years of college. Thomas worked for two years until he could enter Edinburgh University in 1691. Upon graduation in 1694 he began theological training and became a tutor in the home of a Lieutenant Colonel. While executing that role he faced significant opposition. He reported in his memoirs that this experience prepared him for the Gospel ministry. He learned during this phase to have charge over souls and to overcome his natural bashfulness as well as the fear of man.⁹

In 1697 he became licensed by the Presbytery of Duns and Chirnside. His preaching had a reputation for carrying great power. In 1699 he was ordained to the ministry in Simprin and in his pastoral work there was devoted to catechizing and visiting. The year 1700 brought him a wife who in time developed a disorder of her intellect. Much of her time would be spent confined to a bed. Two of their five children did not survive childhood. Next he was called as pastor in Ettrick where he would remain the rest of his life. There he encountered much personal

⁸ Ibid., 180.

⁹⁹ Thomas Boston, *Memoirs of the Life, Time, and Writings of the Reverend and Learned Thomas Boston, A.M.*, rpt. (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 29.

discouragement due to his circumstances. The office of pastor was not well respected there. When some of his work began to be published, outsiders traveled into the community to hear him preach. In 1710 when he first served Holy Communion in Ettrick, sixty persons partook. In 1731 at his last Communion, seven hundred and seventy-seven received the bread and cup.

Boston joined three hundred Presbyterian ministers who refused to sign a pledge supporting the king who would of necessity belong to the Church of England. He declined to sign at risk of being fined more than he had ever earned. However, the penalty was never collected from him. He published numerous works and became very devoted to the study of Hebrew and was highly regarded by the Hebrew scholars of that day. The early shaping of his theology was due to influence from Ursinus, the primary author of the Heidelberg Catechism. In his writings he described what is evidence for true faith which is a desire for union and communion with Christ combined with a desire to be rid of sin. Those with true faith will desire the whole Christ – for sanctification as well as justification.¹⁰

An early section of his memoirs is consumed with self-focused introspection which exposes a hunger for a subjective sense of comfort, conviction and instruction. Many up and down emotions are recorded. At the same time that he is engaged in such internal struggles, the presbytery seemed to be fraught with strife and division. Over time the tedious record of detailed introspective reasoning seems to have given way to greater confidence in the objective truth and promises of Scripture. However, the church was not featured in his memoirs as a source of objective comfort to him. He does not major on comforting assurance from the Lord's Supper but instead looks for more general emotional tokens of good from God. He emphasized periods of sweet communion with Christ in prayer. His own account indicates that in 1705 he decided to increase the administration of the Lord's Supper, "that soul-strengthening ordinance," to twice annually.¹¹

Describing one instance of private study and meditation he said that he "got a view of the transcendent glory and excellency of Christ, with the emptiness of all things beside Him; and the desire of my heart was towards Him."¹² He also recorded feeling the Lord's absence. In recounting how he felt each week, sometimes he would believe that the Holy Spirit had been blowing upon Him and other times not.¹³

His deep inner struggles made him make heavy use of the Scriptures in order to find direction and comfort – especially the Psalms. Repeatedly, though, he would come back to despairing of not having a sense of Christ's presence. On one occasion, apparently because he committed a perceived fault of discussing

¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹ Ibid., 175.

¹² Ibid., 75-76, 78.

¹³ Ibid., 81.

worldly business with his father before an evening service he experienced the following:

Thus, through the just displeasure of a holy jealous God, I fell into a heavy case, wherein for several days I lay. I was that night deprived of His countenance in His work; on the morrow I was averse to duty; religion was to me as a strange thing; and my mind was darkened as to my uptakings of Christ.¹⁴

He spoke about being under the Lord's anger and unable to seek pity from Him. Again, there does not seem to be any comfort from any objective presence of Christ mediated through the church. He seemed to be at the mercy of a very tender conscience that tended toward legalism. After a season of spiritual doldrums the struggling pastor spoke of relief that came while preparing for a sermon on John 5:40. He wrote,

Whereupon my false heart began to be lifted up: but the Lord turned the chase, and I was made to see my own emptiness and nothingness, and my heart was enlarged in the thankfulness, my mind more than ordinarily cleared as to the uptaking of the Lord's Word, and my heart heavenly; so that I got the revival I had wanted for these several days.¹⁵

Even that joy, however, was tempered with fear, for he continued, "But oh! my joy is mixed with mourning; for I fear I will not get His smiles kept, and His frowns are bitter as death."¹⁶ Much time was spent managing his subjective sense of satisfaction regarding his union with Christ and usefulness to Christ. Out of fear of losing that sense he abstained from as much worldly business as possible, only wishing to think on Scripture and pray. There are similarities between his spirituality and that of the Medieval monastics. On one occasion he believed he had lost his "frame" because he committed the sin of entering a prayer meeting without seeking the Lord beforehand.¹⁷ In fact, it seems that with every major decision or change he faced his "frame" was lost, and he entered a dark place of doubts and fears.¹⁸

One Saturday he had spent time considering worldly matters, and then had to engage in much prayer and meditation on the love of Christ before, as he says, "I got to love Him, confidence in Him, and contempt of the world, with a soul-satisfaction in Him."¹⁹ It is difficult to think of a character in Holy Scripture who operated with the same scruples regarding seeking Christ's presence. In thinking ahead toward Nevin, perhaps at very least a contrast might be developed

¹⁴ Ibid., 116.

¹⁵ Ibid., 117.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 134.

¹⁸ Ibid., 202.

¹⁹ Ibid., 135.

between Nevin's more logical way of developing spirituality and Boston's more feeling-oriented path. It may be that Boston's very poor health had something to do with his outlook on life and godliness, although Nevin, too, suffered from his own physical maladies which some suggested served to make him a bit too sharp in his exchanges with opponents. Boston spoke of frequent melancholy and indisposition of both body and mind, and vomiting bringing relief. Someone so chronically ill could easily believe that God had abandoned him. A significant percentage of the self-focused feelings seemed to diminish after his move to Ettrick and a bit more of his family life developed over the same time period. He actually learned to see his affliction as evidence of God's love which drew him nearer to Christ and awakened within him a powerful cleaving to Christ.²⁰ When reading of his constant inner turmoil, the words of Marshall come to mine as he counseled that instead of becoming overly self-focused and engaging in overly extensive self-analysis, it would be more fruitful to give oneself to receiving Christ and walking in Him.

As Boston sensed death approaching he examined himself regarding assurance of salvation. His philosophy of life was offered in these words – "I would rather have a cross of His choosing for me, than a crown of my own choosing for myself."²¹ He was scholarly and devotional, driven far more by apparent affection than Nevin seemed to be. Believing that he had so little glorified God in his life, he asked to be given grace to glorify God in his death. Specifically he requested that he be given patience in case of a lengthy illness, and if his ability to speak would be taken from him, he desired to be able to glorify God with his countenance.²²

Far more than can be found in the later Nevin, Boston would demonstrate a constant dependence on Christ in all things, seeking grace and the Holy Spirit to enable Him to be and do right. Nevin trafficked in much more objective terms and did not leave much room for debates about sensing whether or not a "frame" was lost. In that sense, Boston's subjectivity deals a great amount of warmth and encouragement to the hurting believer, while Nevin's emphasis on objectivity could lend stability to the confused.

It cannot be said that Boston was void of any evidence of a high regard for the church. At Ettrick he challenged the people about their neglect of participating in worship, but he does seem to have reverted back to only annual administration of the Lord's Supper. He confronted the people regarding their neglect of baptism for their children.²³ When the presbytery was split on the matter of signing the oath of abjuration, he worked to convince the dissenters not to withdraw from the presbytery.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., 234.

²¹ Ibid., 432.

²² Ibid., 433.

²³ Ibid., 483-484.

²⁴ Ibid., 273-274.

John Williamson Nevin

John Nevin was born near Shippensburg, Pennsylvania on February 20, 1803 on a farm and into a Presbyterian family. His ancestors (Nevin/MacNevin) had fled persecution in Ireland, coming first to New York and then settling in the Cumberland Valley of Pennsylvania. The Presbyterian Church assumed the role of the mother of believers who were birthed into its care by baptism, and her responsibility included training children so as to aim them toward participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion which was emphasized as an objective means of grace. Sunday evenings were devoted to catechizing. Observing the Lords' Supper involved a four-day process of humiliation and fasting before encountering God's presence in participating. However, by 1870 much of that established way of Presbyterianism was diminishing.²⁵

Nevin's father prepared him for college by age fourteen. In the fall of 1817 he was sent to Union College in Schenectady, New York. He graduated with honors in 1821 but in ill health. In that environment the religious and secular were not well integrated. The religious aspect consisted of mandatory attendance at morning and evening prayers and at church on Sunday.

When a revival came to the campus, John eventually stumbled into participation by following the mechanical formula presented to him. He was led to believe that by seeking this experience he would be entered into the church as if he had never been a part of it from the time of his baptism as an infant. Later in life he would not consider this event worthless; instead he saw it as a significant part of his progress of spiritual maturity. The issue he had with the system eventually was stated this way:

It was based throughout on the principle that regeneration and conversion lay outside of the Church, had nothing to do with baptism and Christian education, required rather a looking away from all this as more of a bar than a help to the process, and were to be sought only in the way of magical illapse or stroke from the Spirit of God.²⁶

Boston seemed prone to look for such strokes from the Spirit of God, but not in regard to conversion and without the anti-church bent demonstrated by revivalists of Nevin's day. Nevin was wary of such reliance on subjective experience as opposed to the objective nature of the Christian life. He believed the subjective path led to too much unhealthy self-introspection, a charge that might have been levelled against Boston especially in his earlier years.²⁷

²⁵ Theodore Appel, *The Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin, D.D., LL.D.* (Philadelphia: Reformed Church Publication House, 1889), 32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

Boston's intense self-introspection opens for the reader the opportunity to evaluate the soul and its motives in detail, but such an approach is best tempered by the churchly approach Nevin promoted.

Nevin wrote of his own experience in the revivalistic culture during college, "My own experience in this way, at the time here under consideration, was not wholesome, but rather very morbid and weak."²⁸ He believed he would have been better off sticking to the sacramental nurture received within mother Church and schooling in the Apostles' Creed which had been relegated by revivalism to the dead world of popery. If the Apostles' Creed were to have been reintroduced into the Presbyterian Church of Nevin's day, Appel records that it would have been censured as an unpardonable innovation.²⁹ However, it was used extensively in German Reformed and Lutheran churches and explained in the Heidelberg Catechism.

Nevin's biographer recorded that his health was so poor after college that he remained home in order to recuperate. This time period, he noted, was characterized by poor health both physically and spiritually. Boston, on the other hand, seemed to allow his illness to eventually drive him to seek in Christ better spiritual health. Nevin did not think very highly of the spirituality he had developed during his time as a college student. He believed it was unfruitful to spend so much time fixated on his own constitution and experience rather than looking outward "to the redeeming facts and powers of Christianity." Nevin compared the period to a "painful autopsy," and "everlasting studying of symptoms."³⁰ His home presbytery of Carlisle was becoming puritanized in his opinion, and the older people seemed to him to be maintaining a dead formality, causing Nevin to wonder if they possessed any true religion. Eventually his interest in divinity studies directed him to enroll at Princeton which program he began in the fall of 1823. As classes began his health was so poor he feared he would not live long enough to graduate.

In his studies he found himself torn between Puritan New England revivalism represented strongly among the students who were drawn toward an experimental focus, and old school Presbyterian such as was inherited from seventeenth-century men like Baxter, Owen and Howe, represented more strongly among the professors. The revivalists represented themselves as having the only true sense of the Gospel in the country but at the same time were outspokenly unchurchly and unsacramental.³¹

John struggled with whether he was called to the pastorate and explored opening a classical school in Harrisburg. Then direction came as Dr. Hodge of Princeton would be leaving for further study in Germany and recommended Nevin to fill in

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 86.

³⁰ Ibid., 41.

³¹ Ibid., 48.

for him as an assistant teacher. At the time Hodge returned to Princeton (1828), the Presbyterian Church was establishing a new seminary at Allegheny, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburgh, and Nevin was invited to become chair of Biblical Literature which he would hold for ten years from 1830 until 1840. He was examined by the Carlisle Presbytery on October 2, 1828 and licensed to preach. As he waited for the seminary to launch he began preaching twice weekly and was very well received. More than one congregation desired to have him as pastor. Similar to the accounts of Boston's life, he led family devotions when he was home with his family. Much of his writing during this time was for a paper called *Friend*, and the articles he published focused on temperance and condemning worldly amusements, infidelity, theaters, etc. For his outspoken opposition to slavery a prominent Pittsburgh physician labeled him "the most dangerous man in all Pittsburgh."³² Perhaps in comparing spirituality one could conclude that a Puritan such as Boston was stronger at teaching how to depend on Jesus daily, but Nevin may have been more apt to directly explain how to grasp theology and philosophy in relation to the currents of contemporary culture.

In 1837 Nevin was outspoken about opposing a division of the Presbyterian Church. He sided with Old School Presbyterianism, but he saw that there was also truth in the New School as well. During this time he learned German and began to explore German theology. Particularly formative for him during this time was Neander's history of the church which presented the church as progressively advancing over centuries.³³ He had already experienced what he termed an "historical awakening" while at Princeton in that he found the significance of understanding church history. He spoke of Neander's impact on him as "an actual awakening of the soul." He saw history as conforming to a divine universal plan summarized by "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world."³⁴ He came to understand that the present can only properly be interpreted in light of the events of history which produced it.

Other characteristics of his practice and thought were the following: that he regularly engaged the Bible in its original languages; that he sought to relate an individual truth to the whole or related in some way to general life; that he was fascinated by Schleiermacher and Rothe in addition to Neander but only accepted material from them critically and only after checking their German theology against Scripture.³⁵ His pursuit of philosophy and theology was executed with an eye toward the welfare of man and the progress of society.³⁶ Puritanism more overtly pronounced an emphasis on pursuing the glory of God. Nevin's goal was to rescue the church from danger. Appel records these words from an address Nevin made in a chapel service in 1840 which feature some of

³² Ibid., 69, 71.

³³ Ibid., 77.

³⁴ Ibid., 83.

³⁵ Ibid., vii.

³⁶ Ibid., ix.

the themes just listed: "There is a common mind belonging to each age and to every country, to every province and class of society, which surrounds men as an atmosphere and in the end forms the character of the individual and the community." "The proper and the final regeneration of the world depends on the spread and triumph of this principle, by bringing together into one the dissevered elements of humanity, that are now scattered abroad."³⁷ Puritan hopes were delineated more specifically as salvation unfolding as Christ's kingdom was perfected and its members renewed in His image. Were the two parties who at times sounded very different referring to the same goal, using different words because of their varied contexts and the nature of the opponents they perceived in their own day? Nevin too was interested in conformity to the image of Christ.

Because of his desire to see all individual parts in relation to a grander whole, Nevin saw a party spirit within the church as producing dark and malignant fanaticism and excesses, fostering self-glorification and self-will along with uncharitableness, malice and hatred.³⁸ Would Owen's separation from the established church to become a Congregationalist be a violation of Nevin's standards? When observing the context and the reason for separation, it is possible to vindicate Owen from transgressing Nevin's pointed principles of ecclesiology. And it is impossible to know if Nevin would have gone easier in his critique of Puritanism had he experienced the persecution Puritans faced and the coercion to violate their consciences.

Nevin saw himself as very Christological and constantly moving from the simply subjective to the supernatural objective and from the spiritually abstract to the historically concrete or from a Gnostic ideal to what is Christologically real.³⁹ Humanity fallen in Adam must be resurrected in Christ to whom it must be organically bound in union through the medium of the church by the Holy Spirit's power.⁴⁰ His students reported he was a storehouse of knowledge and lectured without a book in front of him. He spent an hour in prayer each morning. When later in life he resigned as president of the college in Lancaster he was asked how he would spend his time, to which he replied, "In preparing for heaven."⁴¹ He was not a cold intellectual, but he was wary of schismatic mystics. He understood the fact that investigation of truth depends on the right state of one's affections. If the affections are diseased, many things are made to appear in a false light or a distorted form. He said, "Opinion is always mighty, where a man has come to move and have his being in its mystic circle, and such a power not only sways the will, but becomes the very light of thought itself. In this way parties often create for themselves both reason and will of their own." "The Spirit of Party," he warned is opposed to all true greatness of soul."⁴² Reading his arguments, one is

³⁷ Ibid., 118-119.

³⁸ Ibid., 119-120.

³⁹ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 170.

⁴¹ Ibid., 91.

⁴² Ibid., 120-121.

struck by the fact that often they are constructed philosophically instead of simply resting on exposition of a passage of Scripture. He reasoned that the Spirit of Party is opposed to the Spirit of the Gospel, for it is faith working within a person which enables him to withstand the press of opinions from the surrounding culture.⁴³ This implies centrality of Scripture.

The Gospel he identified as the mind of Jesus, saying, "It is only then by communion with what is absolutely true, and great, and good, that the original grandeur of our nature can ever be evolved in its full and just proportions."⁴⁴ He believed that worldliness had to be attacked, and the perfect state of heaven should be the goal toward which the believer presses. It is the pursuit of heaven that produces an excellent nature while residing on earth.⁴⁵ Obviously he did not wish to see a constricting emphasis on the subjective which drowned out all personal self-examination.

The German Reformed seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania was struggling to fill a vacancy, and some pastors from Pittsburgh had met Nevin and were aware of his interest in all things German. He accepted the call to fill the empty position and transitioned his family to Mercersburg in the spring of 1840. At that time he met Frederick Augustus Rauch, president of Marshall College who mentored Nevin in the benefits and pitfalls of German theology and philosophy. Rauch's *Psychology, or A View of the Human Soul, including Anthropology* had a definite shaping influence on Nevin. When Rauch was accused of transcendentalism Nevin defended him, asking if it was necessary to conclude that since in a certain strand of philosophy some have ended in pantheism, then no one could develop that philosophy in an orthodox way. He warned against wielding an undefined label to dismiss all bearing that label as heretical.

Partially through Nevin's influence the use of the Heidelberg Catechism as a worthy guiding standard was revived within the German Reformed Church. He urged the German church to resist Puritan efforts to empty the church of everything churchly from its past under the guise that it was somehow a deadly evil connected to Romanism. The use of the anxious bench in revivals awakened his ire in that it discarded the old ways of catechetical instruction and reflection. While some saw the New Measures of Finney as the answer to dead formality, Nevin sometimes stood alone to decry the dangers in elevating mere religious experience based on excitement over true religion. His words have power when he wrote, "the difference between *right* action and *wrong* action, we would think, is full as important, to say the least, as the difference between action and no action – no matter what irregularities are attached to it, so long as it stands before us in the holy garb of a revival, it is counted unsafe to call it to account."⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 165.

The system tied to the use of the anxious bench, Nevin claimed, required no spiritual power to produce its effects. Therefore it fell under the category of spiritual quackery, proving itself to be a substitute for true strength, creating false issues for the conscience, replacing the cross, creating disorder, spawning irreverent and vulgar religion and discouraging deep earnest piety. "A sect without a soul has no right to live," he concluded.⁴⁷

When reading Nevin's criticism of the Puritans in which he accuses them of sectarianism, one must be careful to realize that his critiques most directly (and accurately) applied to the version of New England Puritanism of the nineteenth century which in many instances barely touched upon the reality of English Puritan life in the seventeenth century, for while there may have been a greater degree of subjectivity in the early Puritans than Nevin employed in his own spiritual practice, theologians and pastors such as John Owen demonstrated a churchly and creedal approach to spirituality which was mindful of church history, even though they chose a path of separation from the established church.

The new measures which infuriated Nevin appealed to the natural man, not the spiritual as they rested on a Pelagian theory of religion which acknowledged sin but not to the full extent of its effects. Therefore in the revivalistic system, "The ground of the sinner's salvation is made to be at last in his own separate person"⁴⁸ and not in the cross of Christ. Stimulating the flesh cannot act as the mother of spiritual nature. The individual will cannot produce the change of regeneration which comes exclusively from the Holy Spirit. A sinner's own decisions will only lead to self-righteousness, not justification. Justification is by faith and not by feeling. Again, someone like Owen would not be liable for the charges Nevin levelled against revivalist Puritans.

According to Mercersburg, the church is not an "aggregate of parts mechanically brought together" (no doubt the way Nevin perceived the New England Congregational view of his day), but is an organic life and so the mother of believers who imparts life to her children and not vice versa.⁴⁹

After the death of Dr. Rauch, the decision was made to call Philip Schaff, an orthodox Calvinist from Germany, as his replacement in the fall of 1843. Schaff assumed the chair of Church History and Biblical Literature in 1844. Together, their vision of the church would not call for unity under a pope or for all denominations to merge into one, but relates to all who are joined together in the common life of Christ and found in mystical, organic union with Him. Single sects who claim to be the whole body of Christ obviously are deluded.⁵⁰ Human efforts cannot force unity. The Spirit of God must produce like knowledge and love.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 165-167.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 167.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 171.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 218-222.

⁵¹ Ibid., 224.

Such statements resemble Owen perhaps more than Nevin might even have realized, for Owen reacted to the Church of England's attempts to force unity and did not separate from that body under pretense of having discovered for the first time since the days of the apostles the pure and true church. As previously stated, Owen rejected the Presbyterian efforts of the seventeenth century to enforce unity by appealing to civil authorities. Owen likewise believed it best to rely on the Holy Spirit to convict and change hearts.

Nevin believed that while Protestantism was bound to confront Rome's errors, it must be positive in nature because it bears within it the power of a new life. Nevin's opponents wanted to make the church negative, identifying it first by what things it was against – namely Roman Catholicism and much of church history. Mercersburg feared that this approach would spawn innumerable small popes to replace the pope in Rome because a church willfully disconnected from the church of prior ages loses its identity and opens the way for unchurchly, carnal leaders who are not confined by established practices or beliefs of the body of Christ.

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