

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 EIGHT (Cont.)

Conclusion

In his writings Nevin accused the revivalist Winebrenner of using “genuflections and prostrations in the aisle or around the altar, noise and disorder; extravagance and rant, mechanical conversions.”¹ Ironically, a great deal of those phrases could be imagined flowing from Owen’s pen as he criticized the Church of England. Even though Nevin makes it seem he has nothing to do with seventeenth-century Puritanism, there was significant agreement between the two schools of thought more than a casual reader might realize.

Perhaps the greatest disagreement to be found in the topics of this chapter was Owen’s and Nevin’s assessments of the worth of the development of the Roman system. While both believed the Reformation was a necessary corrective, neither were hateful toward hierarchy in their rejection of Rome’s abuses. Owen disagreed with its continuance within the Church of England, but he conducted himself civilly and used a tone which demonstrated dignity and decency as befitting a minister of the Gospel. Nevin’s tone, especially with regard to Rev. Winebrenner could be bitterly sharp and caustic. Owen did not have the arrogance Nevin normally associated with the label of Puritan as he assessed the New England Puritans of his own day. Owen was not a “Bible-only fundamentalist.” He demonstrated through many references in his writings a knowledge of and respect for church history and therefore his writings do not carry a torch for the movement that claims God was not present in the Church for a thousand years, although he does certainly see many abuses and missteps within it. However, he admitted that he and his own age were surely full of error that he could not perceive. His separation was due to matters of persecution and the desire for free exercise of conscience.

Nevin heavily criticized sects for priding themselves in operating without constitution, creed, catechism or a book of order. Owen was instrumental in developing the Savoy Declaration and desired for Congregationalists to be

¹ Sect System, 235.

connectional and to respect other denominations, even while establishing their own sense of order. While he did not develop something like the philosophical ideal/actual model of the Church, it would be hard to find evidence he violated it.

Nevin saw Catholics as one-sided in their objectivity, keeping members of the Roman Church from subjective experience. He saw New England Puritanism as one-sided in its subjectivity, and that to a dangerous level. Just as the crisis in the Roman Church led to a healthy correction and a new era of maturity in the Church, it is logical that the crisis of out of control, rampant, tyrannous subjectivity may give birth to a new era of maturity as well. Present-day evangelicalism can be found to violate what was sacred to both sides presented in this paper – i.e., lacking a high regard for both Scripture and the Church. This leaves it often adrift on a sea of subjectivity seeking a new experience and possibly grasping that experience but not laying hold of Christ.

Taking the best of both Nevin and Owen, perhaps there will come a time for sacramental and liturgical congregational churches that have high regard for church history and for God's Word. For such a system to work, pastors would have to be well educated and work hard to educate parishioners who take responsibility to discern God's will and select and respect officers and to promote the work of the Church to the glory of God. If at the hands of ignorant or unengaged members discipline should fall into disuse, the end would be dissolution. Should members fail to be taught of church history, an arrogant, narrow-minded and dangerously schismatic spirit might tear the church apart. Nevin believed that the Roman system was "the true historical necessity of its day" as a step in the God-supervised unfolding of historical development in the true church.² But he was unable to predict what might come next.

It would be interesting to consider what type of Church Nevin would select if he were able to return to the present day. His German Reformed Church through a series of mergers became wedded to just the group that troubled him so greatly – the New England Congregationalists, and interestingly both branches eventually succumbed to liberalism. His writings give the impression that he would not insist on a certain hierarchy or structure but would assess each congregation for its attitude toward the wider Church, Church history, the sacraments, and so on. If he held true to his own words he would not choose a congregation based on what it was against. Of the hateful sects who even structured their worship based on their hatred for Rome he wrote,

Those who look at Romanism only in this rabid and fanatical way, show themselves by the very fact to have no sense of the divine organization of Christianity as a perpetual living constitution in the world, and no apprehension of the necessity there is that Protestantism should be strictly and truly the product of his life, if it can have any right to exist at all.³

² Ibid., 293.

³ Ibid., 301.

Nevin was deeply troubled by the strife and divisions of the sects he witnessed. He recorded his fears with these words – “Hence many churches instead of one; any number of them indeed, to suit the world’s taste; till the conception runs out finally into the open sea of no church whatever.”⁴ Dr. Owen answered Dr. Stillingfleet’s similar concern by explaining that he and his colleagues were driven out of the Church of England. There was little likeness, if any, between Owen’s reasons for separation and those of the sects Nevin opposed. Owen’s grounds for seceding were that manmade additions in the Church were not edifying. That is a far cry from American sects who each thought themselves to be the only true church.

While Nevin’s presentation of objectivity in the Church can perhaps soothe a troubled soul like Boston’s by drawing him outside of himself to become more fixed on the life of Christ, Owen’s clear adherence to the Bible soothes those who are on edge when reading Nevin. Nevin says all the right things about inspiration and the authority of the Bible, but he says them in a way that at times leads one to believe he is just a sentence away from affirming that the life of the Church supersedes the Bible or replaces it. But in this study such a statement could not be found. Nevin relied far more on church history than the Puritans, almost seeming to elevate it near to the level of Scripture. A question for further study would be to consider whether Nevin filtered his understanding of the Bible through his understanding of philosophy or whether his development of philosophy flowed from Biblical theology.

Owen demonstrated that a congregationally governed Church cannot be wrong in that it was the type of polity original to the Church in the book of Acts. However, pursuing such polity can be done wrongly.⁵ He used Scripture to guide him in his desire to glorify God, and he exposed the dangers of a forced objective standard of spirituality. Nevin used Scripture to explore the reality of mystical union with Christ. And he exposed the dangers that a runaway sense of independence can foster. Owen feared transmitting heresy through compliance to hierarchical infrastructure. Nevin feared transmitting lawlessness by an unrestrained independent spirit, an actual without a true sense of the ideal. Matching these two men and their strengths together provides inciteful correctives to address dangers within the church of the present day.

⁴ Ibid., 298.

⁵ Owen confessed he was very close to agreement with Presbyterianism which allowed members to select officers and did not require an appeal to any body outside of the individual congregation to practice discipline.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).