

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 NINE

Contrasting Views of Holy Scripture

A violin in the hands of a bluegrass fan would sound quite different than in the hands of a classically-trained artist preparing to perform a concertino. The violin is what it is. Its fundamental constitution is not changed depending on the person performing it or the style of music preferred. If one of the musicians begins to alter the violin itself, it ceases to be a violin. As long as the violin is unaltered, the sounds produced will depend on the skill and goal of the player and context of the occasion. The personal history and the nature of the training of the person making use of the instrument all factor in to what will be presented.

In thinking of Scripture, similar dynamics can be applied when analyzing how Scripture was viewed or employed by theologians and pastors from the history of the church. The analogy is certainly not a perfect one, because if for the sake of the comparison Scripture is considered to be an instrument, the real Player is God. However, there are those who because of their training or because of a mixture of godly and malicious goals or because of perhaps bitter life experiences, have grossly mishandled the Scriptures when judged against the historical verdict of the church as to what is orthodox interpretation.

Even where two interpreters fall well within the bounds of orthodoxy, there will be varying positions that develop, spawning continuing debates regarding hermeneutics. Partly these debates will be shaped by the background, personal experience, intellectual capacity and training, as well as goals contingent, for example, on circumstances such as the need of the hour to confront heresy or address a crisis. One aspect of Scripture may be more strongly emphasized when confronting heresy. Another aspect of Scripture may be considered non-negotiable because of an inflexible personality who wants to safeguard those entrusted to his care and so resorts to black-and-white distinctions where others cannot recognize them in the same favorite Scriptures. Of course, each is at the mercy of the Holy Spirit to convict of the truth and to illumine the mind and to grant the grace of repentance for error.

Present-day descendants of Puritan theology would read John Williamson Nevin, who in conjunction with his colleague Philip Schaff, formulated what became known as the Mercersburg theology, with a bit of suspicion that his philosophical intuitions may have skewed his perception of the very nature of Holy Scripture and led him to deemphasize the centrality of the atonement. On the other hand, present-day heirs of the Mercersburg tradition would approach Puritan writers with a concern that they employed Scripture in a mechanical way which failed to consider the impact of the incarnation on hermeneutics. In the following pages both Nevin's and Puritan hermeneutical philosophy will be surveyed in an attempt to discern if common ground can be found, if the two are irreconcilable (meaning one must be outside the bounds of orthodoxy), or if the two can complement each other.

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