

## **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 (Cont.)**

#### **A Point of Contact with Puritan Thinking on the Centrality of the Incarnation**

The incarnation played such a central role for Nevin, that it permeated his sense of hermeneutics. He believed that from the beginning of Genesis that the world was presented as an organic whole which is completed in man. “The Jewish dispensation had respect to the wants of the universal world, and was intended from the beginning to make room for the coming of Christ.” “The incarnation, in this view, was no passing theophany or avatar. It was the form in which the sense of all previous history came finally to its magnificent outlet,” “the real union of the everlasting Word with our fallen life.” “Christ is the sense of all previous history, the grand terminus towards which it was urged from the beginning; while in this very same character, at the same time, he brings into union with it a new divine force which was not in it before, though required from the first to make it complete.”<sup>1</sup> The Spirit’s descent upon Christ at His baptism was the way to eventually enter the whole family of redeemed believers.<sup>2</sup> Nevin endorsed the view of Robert Isaac Wilberforce who drew an analogy which said that just as the sun’s influence and presence is here on earth even though the sun is not, so the Son’s presence is here even as He is exalted in heaven. Grace and truth flow to believers from heaven by means of God’s presence – not meaning material contact but spiritual power, and not figuratively but truly united to the humanity of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Continuing in Nevin’s thought, “Christianity . . . is the actual elevation of our general life into a higher sphere of existence.” Only by Christ coming in the flesh is humanity made complete for He brought into it light, life, and immortality. Christ is “the power of a new creation in its constitution.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The New Creation in Christ,” 39-41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>3</sup> “Wilberforce on the Incarnation,” 73.

<sup>4</sup> “The New Creation in Christ,” 44.

Is there anything in Puritan writings which corresponds to this idea of the centrality of the incarnation? It seems all points to the atonement, and any attention given to the centrality of the atonement is well and good and right. Nevin would not want the significance of the atonement to be downplayed. He would want more time allotted to the incarnation.

In Puritan logic, it seems that if Adam had not sinned, there would have been no need for the incarnation, since there would have been no need for atonement. But there is at least one Puritan, Thomas Goodwin, who placed a bit more emphasis on the incarnation and implied that even if Adam had not sinned, humanity would not have been complete without it.

Goodwin explained that there is a distinction between natural righteousness and supernatural grace, or knowing God in a way that is natural to man versus the knowledge of and fellowship with God which is supernatural or above nature.<sup>5</sup> God was not obligated to extend supernatural grace to Adam to keep him from falling. The supernatural faith believers possess in the present day is superior to the natural way of knowing and enjoying God prior to the fall into sin. By supernatural he means being illumed by a “light above the way of nature.”<sup>6</sup> This seems to fit with Nevin’s idea that the incarnation was necessary in order to elevate human nature above the natural.

Goodwin wrote that at creation God implanted in man’s nature “holy and sanctifying notions and principles” with reference to His own nature and His will regarding relations with man.<sup>7</sup> The whole law was to Adam a law of nature written on his heart. Two sacraments confirmed this knowledge to him – the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, natural knowledge came by light of infused principles and by observation of God’s works. First Corinthians fifteen contrasts the natural with the supernatural/spiritual state, indicating that the latter is the state into which Christ brings believers. Formerly, man’s way of knowing God and recognizing the image of God in himself was due to nature.<sup>9</sup>

The initial covenant was thus the covenant of nature and so lacked the supernatural elements of the covenant of grace. It was to have been fulfilled by doing good out of the principles of holiness originally implanted in man. Adam’s reward for continuing in obedience would have been the continuation of a happy life in paradise fitting for his natural state. By keeping natural righteousness,

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Goodwin, “Of the Creatures, and the Condition of Their State by Creation,” *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, volume 7, rpt. (Miami: Hardpress, formerly printed in Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1863), 44.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

Adam would not have been translated into the spiritual life in heaven which is promised now to saints. First Corinthians 15:47-48 presents Christ as the heavenly Man, the Lord from heaven, in contrast to Adam who is an earthly man. Goodwin states, "Christ was the first and only author of that heavenly life which the saints in heaven do enjoy, and he himself coming from heaven he carries us thither."<sup>10</sup>

So Adam, being earthly, was incapable of reaching happiness higher than that of earth. Paul's focus in 1 Corinthians 15 is the believer being carried to heaven and not so much focused "upon the merit of Christ's death, as upon his being 'the Lord from heaven,' because heaven was his natural due, and he descended from his right when he came down upon earth."<sup>11</sup> It is only fitting that since heaven is Christ's natural place He should return there, "whereas Adam was but a 'man from the earth,' and therefore could never have come to heaven" on his own.<sup>12</sup> John 3:13 says no man has ascended up to heaven but he that first came down from there.

Adam's paradise and the original Sabbath were both types of heaven as Adam was of Christ. Heavenly paradise was made accessible only by way of the second Adam. No second Adam would have meant no heavenly paradise. The thief on the cross had access only through Christ (Luke 23:43). Ephesians 2:6 indicates that the way saints get to sit in heavenly places is together with Christ their Head. The moral law or law of nature made no promise of entrance into heaven. All the covenant of nature could have done would have been to confirm and keep Adam in the condition he initially entered and was incapable of transplanting him into heaven.<sup>13</sup> The perfection Adam possessed was suitable for him, but it was not a transcendent and absolute perfection.<sup>14</sup>

Romans 5:14 presents Adam as a type of Christ who was to come, and Goodwin classifies him as a public person since he was the head of mankind.<sup>15</sup> As a public person, Adam conveys natural life, but Christ introduced a new type of humanity and conveys spiritual life.<sup>16</sup> As Nevin would teach, Christ introduced into the flow of humanity a version that is in union with God.

Once one acknowledges Adam as a type, the implication is that it was always God's will for Christ to come (1 Corinthians 15:44-49 – as we have borne the image of the earthly, so we shall bear the image of the heavenly Adam).<sup>17</sup> As a common or public person, Adam had the ability to convey not just his fallenness

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

but his pristine state as well. Because he fell into sin, that fall was conveyed to all. Here is where Nevin would clarify that Adam's state was passed on organically, where many in the Puritan camp would emphasize the legal imputation of guilt over and against the organic position. Both Goodwin and Nevin would agree that Christ's introduction into the world was always intended since Adam is named a type. Goodwin points out that Melchisedec as a type of Christ means that God designed Melchisedec's condition to resemble Christ and not Christ's to resemble Melchisedec.<sup>18</sup> Christ's coming as the spiritual perfection of the natural was inevitable.<sup>19</sup>

Goodwin ventured further in his argument by building on the idea that in Christ the union of the divine and human was from the start intended as the way to glory for humans. In light of the fact of Adam's fall and his failure to preserve humanity in righteousness until the second Adam arrived to bring perfection, God decreed an improved role for Christ by adding His death and work of redemption to cancel the effects of the fall and set forth God's love more fully, bringing to light the glorious nature of our intended state in Christ.<sup>20</sup> Returning again to comment on First Corinthians fifteen, Goodwin makes the observation that regarding the new bodies believers will receive, Paul's argument doesn't focus on Christ's death and resurrection but on the fact that Christ's human nature is more excellent than Adam's before the fall, since He is in union with the Godhead. Jesus was appointed to be the quickening Spirit, the Godhead being the life and quickener of His human nature.<sup>21</sup> This argument fits well with Nevin's philosophical model of the higher nature acting on the lower and of the necessity of the ideal being manifested in the actual.

In one article Nevin stated that Christ Himself, above anything He said or accomplished is the core of redemption. "His incarnation is the mystery of godliness which carries in it germinally the whole power of victory over sin and hell."<sup>22</sup> The doctrines of inspiration of the Bible, universal human depravity, God's providence in redemption, the atonement, justification through Christ's righteousness, regeneration, sanctification, etc., cannot be developed properly "except as our apprehension of them is determined first of all, and exclusively of all else, from the overpowering vision of what the Redeemer is in His own glory."<sup>23</sup>

For Nevin, the central meaning of the Gospel is "the disclosure of a new world of powers in the living Christ, transcending supernaturally the universal constitution of nature, and carrying in itself both the promise and the possibility of victory for

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>22</sup> John Williamson Nevin, "The Internal Sense of Holy Scripture" *The Reformed Quarterly Review* vol. 30, no. 1 (January 1883): 5-6.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 7.

our fallen humanity over all the evils under which it is found groaning so helplessly through the ages.” Christ joins the believer through spiritual birth to Himself and raises him/her to “the actual life of heaven.”<sup>24</sup> Christ’s humanity possessed immeasurably more significance than all that had gone before it in the old creation.<sup>25</sup> The new creation Christ promises should not be thought of primarily as a doctrine or as a mechanical work He performs external to Himself. It is constituted in His glorious person.<sup>26</sup> He presently conveys life to the church as evidenced by transformed love, power, will, understanding, goodness, etc. No truth in the Bible or righteousness in the church can be true and genuine without Him.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 24.