

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 NINE (Cont.)

Surveying Puritan Hermeneutics

John Owen in his work *The Divine Original, Authority, Self-Evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures* pictured the authors of Scripture as musical instruments which produce a sound “according to the hand, intention, and skill of him that strikes it.”¹ Matthew 10:20 records Jesus telling the Apostles that the Spirit of the Father was the One speaking through them. They were not original crafters of the words they issued. Not only the doctrine in the Scriptures, but the very words are from God.² It includes no rational apprehensions, conceptions of fancy or imagination of the hearts of the authors.³ The authority of God is the sole reason of assenting to Scripture as worthy of the submission of human hearts and consciences.⁴

After spending so many of the preceding paragraphs on Nevin, perhaps Owen’s work seems to hint at a mechanical approach to Scripture as something external to God. Owen does not appear to highlight the life of Jesus being conveyed through the written text. But considering the different contexts and purposes inviting each to write, one might conclude that the two were not in entirely different camps. Owen put forth a wonderfully high view of Scripture without pandering to rationalism, allowing a runaway subjectivity or eclipsing the presence of the living Word with his fidelity to the written Word. Puritans often seem concerned how to employ the Word in application to everyday living. In other words, to put this concept in language that resembles Nevin, the ideal in the mind/soul must be made to be actual in behavior. They believed that hermeneutics would be incomplete without application.⁵ Their masterful approach

¹ John Owen, *Of the Divine Original, Authority, Self-Evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures*, The Works of John Owen, ed. William H. Goold, vol. XVI (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006, rpt.), 299.

² *Ibid.*, 300.

³ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁵ Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 27.

can be enriched and granted even greater majesty when combined with Nevin's perspective of partaking of the objective life of Christ when engaging Holy Scripture. Adding a Mercersburg flavor may grant a sense of more imminent power.

In this particular work Owen seems concerned to establish the Bible as authority rather than as a means of intimate fellowship with God. He plainly asserts that Scripture does not derive its authority from anything but itself, that all authority comes from the Author, and that Scripture is the way to know God's mind and will.⁶ One might assume that Nevin at this point would respond that Scripture is God giving Himself to us and not merely a channel through which can be communicated authoritative information from Him. Both are true, but Nevin's war on rationalism which he recognized as deadly to the church caused him to devise arguments which wrested the Word of God out of the domain of those who thought to make it fit for natural man. Owen would realize the need for regeneration in order to interpret Scripture properly.

When Owen says that the Word is received on the basis of God's authority, he proceeds to explain that the Spirit and the Living Word bear witness to it. Nevin would go further and assert the objective presence of Christ within it as the inner soul of the outward letter (body). Both would agree that the Scriptures are self-evidencing just as light is self-authenticating and requires no proof or testimony when it arrives.⁷ The gap seems to close between these two key figures in the schools of thought under consideration when Owen writes, "God is light essentially, and is, therefore, known by the beaming of his eternal properties in all that outwardly is of him."⁸ The Word of God is light itself. It is "the most glorious light of the world, the most eminent reflection of uncreated light and excellencies."⁹

Analyses of later New England Puritanism show a view of the Bible as God's declared will for the world and men's lives. They reveal a quest to find from the Bible direction on very practical matters such as what style of haircut should be selected or which type of leader is an appropriate choice.¹⁰ Certainly the Bible is a source of wisdom, but the danger is that if it is reduced to a guidebook for establishing rules, one may miss encountering God, a goal which seemed to be preserved by Mercersburg's perspective. Those later New England Puritans heavily documented their teaching with Scripture citations, but they increasingly involved logic as a tool to assist in the interpretive process, thus subjecting

⁶ Owen, 308-309, 315.

⁷ Ibid., 319.

⁸ Ibid., 320.

⁹ Think of Nevin's ideal pushing into the world of the actual.

¹⁰ Robert A. Coughenour, "The Shape and Vehicle of Puritan Hermeneutics" *Reformed Review*, vol, 30, no. 1 (1976): 24.

interpretation to reason's authority to a greater degree than Nevin would have wished.¹¹

Returning to Owen, he saw spiritual understanding not as an end in itself but as a means to knowing and enjoying God.¹² He and Nevin both recognized that reality's ability to be grasped and man's ability to grasp it reflect the Creator's design. God granted rational faculties to the human soul so that there could be direct affinity between God's mind and man's. This does not mean man can comprehend God fully (cf. Deuteronomy 29:29), but what is comprehended is real knowledge.¹³

Owen, like Calvin, could be classified a Christian rationalist in that he believed there is no knowledge of God gained from non-communicative experiences. Nevin agreed. God uses language to reveal Himself to humans, and sin so affects the mind that it produces a universal unresponsiveness to the truth. Mere rational instruction is ineffective unless the Holy Spirit illumines the heart to God's Word. Owen was writing to counter Roman Catholic belief that the interpretation of Scripture is closed to the common man who should leave that work to the institutional church.¹⁴ Nevin would reject the Roman Catholic position but would caution against carrying on interpretation ignorant of the context of centuries of interpretation already recorded within the church. Likewise, Owen, in teaching the perspicuity of Scripture, or the doctrine that what a person needs for life and godliness is clear, was not promoting isolated, solo reading. He emphasized the corporate life of Christian community, especially preaching and also discussion. He cited preaching as the primary means of instruction God has appointed.¹⁵

Owen maintained that God not only spoke in the original context of Scripture but speaks the same now in every generation.¹⁶ This sounds similar to Nevin's insistence that God is present and giving Himself in the Scriptures. Packer saw in Owen a recognition that evidentialism and rational arguments may be useful in addressing believers' doubts or coercing unbelievers into intellectual assent, but that there is a difference between human faith and divine faith. "God requires divine faith in the truth and authority of his written word" and this comes by recognizing it as God's Word, writes Packer.¹⁷

Owen sees a continuity between the written Word and living Word, realizing that the same Spirit bears witness to each.¹⁸ The Spirit sheds light on the Scriptures.

¹¹ Ibid., 25.

¹² J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 82.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 83-84.

¹⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁶ Ibid., 88.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 89.

The Spirit adds power so that the Scriptures produce spiritual effects. The Spirit makes the Scriptures personal for each reader, evoking a sense of God's presence.¹⁹ While some of the language seems as if it would draw Nevin's standard attack against mechanically handling the Bible as something external to God, that last point from Owen agrees with Mercersburg's view of the objective presence of God in the Scriptures. It is only by the inward testimony of the Spirit that a person is enabled to grasp the external testimony of the letter of Scripture. Thus, as with Nevin, priority is given to the inner (spiritual) as the source of influence on the outer.

Owen clarifies that the inner testimony is not a voice or a sudden revealing of facts previously unknown. It is the removal of an individual's spiritual blindness.²⁰ More important for Owen than linguistic study or a thorough knowledge of ancient cultures or deep insight into the history of exposition is constant prayer for light, right desire to experience power, diligence in practicing obedience, and regular participation in the life and worship of the church.²¹ Thus Puritan hermeneutical principles rested on more than simply finding the right interpretive tools.²² John Flavel said that reason sits at the feet of faith because while God's works cannot be said to be unreasonable, neither can reason be considered sufficient to grasp them.²³

The Puritans exegeted Scripture to apply it, and this was their strength.²⁴ Packer summarized Puritan governing principles for interpretation with these points: First, interpret literally and grammatically. This point proceeds from the Reformers' rejection of Medieval allegorizing. Pay attention to the original context.²⁵ Nevin embraced the significance of each of these, as long as they were not pursued as an end in themselves. Likewise, Owen warned against constructing theology on grammatico-historical formulas alone. He said to do so would be like trying to make one's house out of the scaffolding that would be used to construct it.²⁶

Second, interpret consistently and harmonistically. The Scriptures are the product of the divine Mind and so would contain no contradictions. What is obscure must be interpreted in the light of what is plain or what Packer terms "fundamental certainties" like the catechism's explanation of the Apostle's Creed, the Ten Commandments, or the sacraments, and so on.²⁷

¹⁹ Ibid., 90-91.

²⁰ Ibid., 92.

²¹ Ibid., 94.

²² Beeke and Jones, 27.

²³ Ibid., 39.

²⁴ Packer, 99.

²⁵ Ibid., 101.

²⁶ Jens Zimmerman, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 103.

²⁷ Packer, 102.

Third, interpret doctrinally and theocentrically. Packer writes, “Scripture is a doctrinal book: it teaches us about God and created things in their relation to him.”²⁸

Fourth, interpret christologically and evangelically. All Scripture was written to bear witness to Christ. Fifth, interpret experimentally and practically. Sixth, interpret with a faithful and realistic application.²⁹

Puritanism recognized that the revelation of God through Christ unfolded in context of God’s covenant which always structured His relationship with His creatures.³⁰ Owen stated that all true theology is rooted in a covenant. The concept of covenant helps articulate how relational theology and revelation is.³¹ In other words, if one were trying to merge a healthy understanding of covenant theology with Mercersburg, it might be presented as a way to grasp how the Ideal is brought into the actual, how the divine and human came to be in union. Carl Trueman is quoted as saying that by means of covenant the ontological gap was spanned between infinite, self-existent God and His finite, dependent creatures.³² Beeke and Jones add, “The hypostatic Word (Christ) provides the foundation for the Spoken Word . . . in the context of the history of redemption, which is concerned with the revelation of the glory of God through the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ.”³³ Also, recalling Nevin’s understating of the importance of intuition for interpretation, covenants can serve to provide an overall understanding of the whole of Scripture and so provide a basis for intuition without negating a paradigmatic use of the incarnation as the key to understanding the Scriptures. In both the covenant of nature and the covenant of grace, God is imminently present as the Author and moving Cause of redemption.³⁴

At first glance it seems that the Puritans focus more on the Spirit with regard to hermeneutics and Mercersburg more on Christ. While to some degree that may be true, the Puritans are not deficient in their recognition that Christ is the “sum and centre of all divinely revealed truth” (Edward Reynolds).³⁵ Beeke and Jones summarize as follows:

While Christ’s own knowledge of God is something utterly beyond believers, He nevertheless provides the ontological basis, in the glory of His person, as the God-man, for revelation to be communicated from God

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 103-104.

³⁰ Beeke and Jones, 12.

³¹ Ibid., 25.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 28.

³⁵ Ibid., 23.

to humanity; He is the Mediator not only in salvation, but also in all communication between God and fallen humanity.³⁶

Stephen Charnock recognized Christ as the beam of light which makes known the perfection of God. He penned, “whatsoever tends to the glory of God . . . is fully revealed by Christ” since He is the very Word of God.³⁷ Divines such as Owen, Goodwin and Charnock saw the Scriptures as dependent on Christ for content.

Another salient point of agreement between Puritan thought and Mercersburg can be highlighted from Owen’s works where he states that to be truly human one must share communion with God.³⁸ Since humans are relational, the ability to know and reason must be a social function more than scientific. Thus for Owen (following Augustine) all knowledge is based on faith.³⁹ Faith for Owen is not reason because it trusts instead of merely deducing. But it is rational, for there is no irrational leap required into some idea of faith that contradicts normal human experience.⁴⁰ “Instead,” writes Zimmerman, “faith opens the right perspective to judge and interpret human existence in the light of the newfound relationship to the Divine.”⁴¹ According to Owen, the principle of spiritual light and life to us is faith. Reason, especially corrupted and depraved, is not capable of discerning divine glory in Christ’s revelation of God.⁴²

Zimmerman claims that Puritan hermeneutics were called both rationalist and mystical.⁴³ Their epistemology combined both, and both elements were found also in Mercersburg’s interpretive approach. Like Nevin, Owen feared that exalting human reason would dismantle Christianity. One who exalts reason expects that all things that are to be believed must be reduced to one’s level of comprehension which is impossible when contemplating God. Pushed forward by pride and “ignorant of God, the human mind turns to its own limited horizon in order to explain existence and refuses any answers to the deep existential questions that revelation has to offer” (quoting Zimmerman). Thus one relying on reason either refuses divine communication or reduces it to the small confines of human capacity.⁴⁴

In turning away from rationalism Owen also rejected the practice of relying on an “inner light.” Such a reliance would produce a private and subjective faith.⁴⁵ The antidote he offered to such subjectivism was to operate hermeneutically in the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 24.

³⁸ Zimmerman, 88.

³⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 92-93.

⁴¹ Ibid., 93.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 89.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 93-94.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 94.

light of Christian doctrine. Nevin would have promoted church in the place of doctrine, but in promoting church he would have been promoting in part the established orthodoxy of centuries of church-tested theology. Elsewhere it has been noted how Owen is on record promoting the context of the church as a safeguard when interpreting Scripture.

Later Puritans like William Bates voiced resistance to testing all claims to truth by scientific method. Exclusive reliance on empirical evidence cannot produce definitive interpretation. One would find that in time critical elements of revelation would be discarded by reason if subjected to approval by scientific method. This is not because the Christian faith is unreasonable, but because the natural heart is not in tune with the divine and is not able to comprehend it.⁴⁶

Zimmerman's assessment of Puritanism is that it held faith that was well balanced between objective and subjective factors.⁴⁷ Puritans were confronting an oppressive objectivity in the Church of England, and so may have seemed to shift at times more heavily to the subjective side, whereas just the opposite was true of Mercersburg which pushed back against a runaway subjectivism in the American church.

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⁴⁶ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 97.