

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 Glimpse at Two Puritan Practical Works

The Christian's Great Interest by William Guthrie (1620-1669), a Scottish Presbyterian, begins with a question of how one can know he has a special interest in Christ and may be assured of salvation and God's favor. The reader quickly finds that the text is filled with citations of Scripture, demonstrating a belief that the Bible is the authority when settling such questions. Infusing the text with Scripture upon Scripture shows a complete reliance on God to speak to very practical issues. The Scriptures are presupposed to be the window into reality and are powerful to affect the reader. Covenant is frequently mentioned as the framework for understanding God's dealings with man. The author's concern is very personal and not abstractly philosophical. The question which introduced the book deals with fear in human experience.

Guthrie is concerned about those who have a false assurance. Could such a false assurance be the product of relying on subjective feelings? He asserts that Scripture must be granted the authority to settle such a question.¹

Some are kept from realizing interest in Christ because they seek salvation within themselves instead of in Christ.² Drawing from what has been stated earlier in this chapter, could the issue be a determination on the part of the seeker to reduce all dealings with God down to what the mind can naturally grasp? One will struggle to know Christ if stubbornly insisting that religion fit one's own predetermined criteria of authentic experience.

Guthrie prescribes that first one must realize the heart's fallen state followed by realizing the satisfying treasure of Christ. Then the heart is turned as the seed of God is deposited there and Christ is formed in it, which in turn produces a flow of new acts representative of a new life. As he develops the idea of being in Christ, he refers to that interchangeably with being in covenant with God.

¹ William Guthrie, *The Christian's Great Interest* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002, rpt.), 25.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

In examining how a person is drawn to Christ, the author explains that some are drawn without conscious preparatory work of the law.³ Others are drawn from the womb, and growing up in religion seems to a degree natural to them. When chronicling conversions recorded in the Bible, Christ is spoken of as breaking in on a person. Christ and Scripture seem to be used interchangeably in this context.⁴

A sign that a person is being converted is that he “becomes careful about his salvation, and begins to take it to heart as the one thing necessary.”⁵ And it happens, “the Lord . . . mightily conveyeth the knowledge of His covenant into the heart, and determines the heart to close with it; and God now draweth his soul so to Christ (John 6:44).”⁶ This indicates that the covenant is a tool for relating the components of salvation, but the essence of salvation is Christ turning a person toward Himself through the Scriptures.

Guthrie describes the resulting change that comes about in the desires of that convert’s heart as an inability to be satisfied with anything less than Christ and a lack of interest in seeking anything more than Christ (Psalm 73:25 – “whom have I in heaven but Thee? Or whom have I desired on earth beside Thee?”).⁷

Hypocrites may feel crushed by the conviction of some gross sin (like with Judas’ betrayal of Christ), but they fail to address their inner corruption and instead show they think highly of themselves and work to preserve their good image in public (e.g., Hazeal in 2 Kings 8:13). Whatever conviction a hypocrite may sense fades easily as her attention is drawn to other interests (cf. Cain building a city in Genesis 4).⁸

Comparing one’s experience with that of another is not a reliable detector of whether convictions are genuine. Has God brought to light personal misery and taught the subject to have no confidence in the flesh, convinced him of the reality of Christ and awakened love for Him, moved him to relinquish partnership with sin which hinders communion with Christ, and created a thankful submission to His will? Those are fitting diagnostic questions.⁹

In acknowledgement of the fact that salvation comes by divine initiative, Guthrie addresses faith as the evidence of a true interest in Christ and not the means of

³ Ibid., 37.

⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 54-55.

⁹ Ibid., 56-58.

it. Faith is the *condition* of the covenant (Acts 16:31), a gift from God and above the ability of flesh and blood to achieve (John 6:44; Philippians 1:29).¹⁰

Justifying faith is not believing oneself to be elect or the recipient of God's love. Hypocrites could claim as much. Instead, it is believing what God says about man's helpless condition and corrupt nature and that there is life in the Son who was slain and is risen. This is more than assenting to propositions, for demons can do that. Truly justifying faith is receiving Christ. So by implication, trusting the testimony of Scripture is encountering Christ Himself.¹¹

Guthrie goes on to survey the ways that faith is depicted in Scripture, the variety of which debunks the necessity of a sinner's prayer as has been popular in recent decades. These include looking to God (Isaiah 45:22), willing (Revelation 22:17), hungering and thirsting for righteousness (Matthew 5:6), leaning on Christ, trust, etc.¹²

Faith is the instrument of conveying God's fullness to man and of maintaining union and communion with Him. Christ is fine clothing for the naked soul (Revelation 3:17-18; Romans 13:14) and milk, wine, water, bread of life plus true manna to the soul that is hungry and thirsty (Isaiah 55:1-2; John 6:48, 51). He is a city of refuge and the high priest under whose eternal tenure the guilty is safe (Hebrews 6:18). If Christ appears so precious to a soul, then she likely has a true interest in Him, for hypocrites do not rely on Christ alone for salvation but find a way to rely on themselves or something else alongside Christ. Nor do they persevere when hardships arise.¹³

Another mark of having a genuine interest in Christ is that the subject becomes a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) whose soul and body undergo renovation in stages, including that of the understanding which can now grasp Christ preached in the Gospel and now recognizes Him to be the wisdom and power of God. Heart affections are likewise renewed which involves having a copy of the law stamped on the heart. The fear of God becomes a governing factor and duty is made to seem pleasant (Ezekiel 36:26-27; Psalm 18:1; Psalm 119:97). Love for God's people springs up (1 John 3:14).¹⁴ Guthrie's warm teaching represents well Nevin's quest to recognize Christ being tied to the Scriptures. While he rifles through them as a textbook capable of addressing practical concerns, his goal is to find Christ. What is absent is the helpful dimension Nevin would stress of encountering Christ in the liturgy and sacraments of the church. None could argue that Guthrie falls short in how he addresses matters of the heart, but some could over time drive that emphasis into the land of runaway subjectivity. Guthrie does not, but it had become widespread in the church of Nevin's day. Whereas,

¹⁰ Ibid., 60-61.

¹¹ Ibid., 61-62.

¹² Ibid., 65-66.

¹³ Ibid., 71-75.

¹⁴ Ibid., 76-78.

in Guthrie's day it would have been hard to consider the actual benefit of liturgy and sacraments when an empty formalism had been forced upon so many in the British Isles.

Guthrie goes on to point out that atheists can possess much knowledge in their practice of spirituality and can demonstrate great joy as they hear the Word of God and may even show outward change which involves abandoning sinful practices. King Saul confessed his sin openly before everyone when he mistreated David. Even wicked King Ahab repented in sackcloth at one point (1 Kings 21:27). Atheists may be granted some ecstatic experience or show a degree of fear of God as Balaam did (Numbers 22:18). Herod showed some sense of love or sympathy toward John the Baptist (Mark 6:26).¹⁵ The distinguishing mark from Guthrie's perspective is that "Hypocrites never apprehended Christ as the only satisfying good in all the world, for which with joy they would quit all; for then the kingdom of God were entered into them."¹⁶ Think of the parable of the man who sold all he had to buy the field in which a treasure was hidden (Matthew 13:44). All the superficial changes produced in a hypocrite's heart are for vain purposes. In time it becomes clear they are not seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33).¹⁷ In order to be genuinely fruitful, one must draw life and sap from Christ the blessed Root.¹⁸

It is evident how Puritans proficiently referenced the Scriptures as an encyclopedia of practical Christianity. Nevin was more focused on the philosophical underpinnings that established perspective or orientation. Puritans were concerned with the daily life of the person in the pew while Nevin tended to the defense of the faith against ideological enemies. Would not one benefit from the function of the other? While studying Puritanism might prove most immediately useful to a growing Christian, without addressing the matters Nevin raised, the path to maturity could at some point be derailed. If an analogy were made using a forester as the subject, the Puritans would thoroughly equip the man to work in the woods and manage his business, while Nevin would have inculcated him in the whole matter of "treeness" or what trees are in their essence.

In the second major portion of his book Guthrie describes how to come to realize an interest in Christ, and He uses a Scripture-laced survey of covenant theology to parse out the unfolding of redemption throughout history. His words are direct in presenting plainly that all who hear the Gospel are obliged to flee the wrath to come and embrace it.¹⁹ One immersed in Mercersburg arguments could

¹⁵ Ibid., 88ff.

¹⁶ Ibid., 91.

¹⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹⁸ Ibid., 97-98.

¹⁹ Ibid., 126.

eventually be derailed by philosophical debates and lose a sense of the direct call of Scripture to repent and trust Christ.

The final popular Puritan work to be considered is *The Bruised Reed* by Richard Sibbes (1577-1635), which is an exposition of Isaiah 42:1-3. It begins by relating that God as an offended party set His love on sinners. Actually, His love rests on Christ truly, but that is on the whole Christ, meaning mystical as well as natural. So converted sinners are loved along with Christ in a single love, and Christ is God's love to believers.²⁰ The condition of those He is depicted as engaging in the chosen passage is that of bruised reeds or smoking flax, both word pictures illustrating weakness, describing those who are reduced to admitting they find no help for their condition within themselves and so are prepared to receive from Christ.²¹ Sibbes writes, "It is no easy matter to bring a man from nature to grace, and from grace to glory, so unyielding and intractable are our hearts."²²

The love of Jesus is revealed in that He was moved by the fact of people who had no shepherd, gave His followers words to pray and His Spirit to intercede for them, wept for His murderers, and now personally intercedes in heaven for His struggling people. He specializes in attending to poor and afflicted persons. His commitment as a physician of souls led Him to give His life for the healing of souls.²³ There is comfort in realizing "there is more mercy in Christ than sin in us." If bruising is a step toward healing through Christ, then Sibbes surmises "it is better to go bruised to heaven than sound to hell."²⁴

A Puritan treatment of a text examines nearly every word or phrase exhaustively in terms of systematic and Biblical theology and application. The goal is to explore the riches of Christ.

The text comforts by conveying that even the tiniest faith (cf. Matthew 17:20, like a grain of mustard seed) is valid. All new creations grow and mature slowly over time. Believers benefit from being encouraged that they are elected to be holy and without blame (Ephesians 1:4). Christ intends to fit them for Himself. "Christ values us by what we shall be, and by what we are elected unto."²⁵

Grace does not do away with corruption all at once, so "the purest actions of the purest men need Christ to perfume them."²⁶ Christ would not quench the smoking flax because the tiniest spark of grace is precious since all grace is from heaven. The principle is illustrated in Jesus' perseverance with His disciples.

²⁰ Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2011, rpt.), 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

“Christ refuses none for weakness of parts, that none should be discouraged, but accepts none for greatness, that none should be lifted up with that which is of so little reckoning with God.” So weakness should not be concealed but addressed directly.²⁷ The church should imitate Christ. Censures should not try to kill a fly on the forehead with a mallet, nor should men be shut out of heaven for a trifle. Power in the church must be wielded for edification and not for destruction.²⁸ In return, those in the pew must be careful not to resort to “unjust clamours.” Sibbes encouraged such disgruntled persons “to give the best interpretation to the actions of governors that the nature of the actions will possibly bear.”²⁹ Within the church family one should look for in a brother or sister evidence of a connection with eternal things more than looking to and focusing on weakness which the Spirit has not yet consumed in them. Said Sibbes, “Some think it strength of grace to endure nothing in the weaker, whereas the strongest are readiest to bear with the infirmities of the weak.”³⁰ Christ is perfectly holy and yet stooped low to patiently reach sinners. Since believers are no holier than He, each must imitate Him.

Sibbes offers practical counsel when he urges persistence in duties even when one’s heart resists them. Applying oneself to duty invites strengthening influence from God.³¹ Our initial aversion to the duty gives opportunity for God to receive all the glory.

Christ has placed on believers His own likeness, and He will not forget Himself, even if they grow sickly or weak. Sibbes affectionately writes, “He was love itself clothed with man’s nature, which he united so near to himself, that he might communicate his goodness the more freely to us.”³² The author felt it important to know that “Christ is never nearer us in power to uphold us than when he seems most to hide his presence from us.”³³ Believers have been given by the Father to Christ, and He will not fail to fulfill the calling the Father has given Him.

The counsel Sibbes offers to those slandered by Satan is to “cast yourself into the arms of Christ, and if you perish, perish there. If you do not, you are sure to perish. If mercy is to be found anywhere, it is there.”³⁴ It is important to note that spiritual exercises alone do not increase grace or improve the soul. This occurs only as “Christ by His Spirit flows into the soul and brings us nearer to himself.”³⁵

²⁷ Ibid., 23-24.

²⁸ Ibid., 30. Cf. Paul’s concern for the repentant member in 2 Corinthians 2:7, that he not be swallowed in grief.

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁰ Ibid., 33.

³¹ Ibid., 53.

³² Ibid., 63.

³³ Ibid., 64.

³⁴ Ibid., 65.

³⁵ Ibid., 71. Cf. Nevin’s philosophical model of the higher order taking the lower up into itself.

Proceeding on through the text, one discovers the valuable insight that God's children usually overcome by suffering and so lambs overcome lions, and doves overcome eagles. Believers must be patient for Christ's victory inside of them unfolds by degrees.³⁶ "Weakness with watchfulness will stand, when strength with too much confidence fails." Further, "weakness with acknowledgement of it, is the fittest seat and subject for God to perfect his strength in."³⁷ Being conscious of our infirmities drives a person out of himself and to Christ. Thus it is more important how one regards her corruptions than that she has them. God's love is not quenched by human weakness.

When a believer draws near to Christ in the ordinances He has established, Christ will draw near to him. He honors the use of means.³⁸

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³⁶ Ibid., 94-95.

³⁷ Ibid., 96.

³⁸ Ibid., 104.