

## 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.)

##### Conclusion

From this brief sample can be seen in the Puritans the depth and richness and practical usefulness of the Scriptures to make application to everyday living. Their use of covenant theology and all interpretive methodology was to seek Christ.

It is true that Nevin wrote critical attacks against things he branded “Puritan” and that today’s heirs of the Puritans withdraw nervously from Nevin’s writings as if they had sacrificed fidelity to Scripture on the altar of German philosophy. The main tenets of both sides are subject to abuse and misuse. What is of great importance is to notice the context and goals of each party. Nevin’s real negative critique of “Puritanism” turns out to fall mostly on later New England Puritans. And the present-day fears of Mercersburg theology are being debunked as increasing attention is carefully turned toward the writing it produced. Often Nevin was wrongly deemed guilty by association due to what he borrowed (critically) from German theologians.

Puritans sought to enrich believers *practically* with the revelation of Christ in the Scriptures since they had been trapped in empty formalism. Nevin sought to confront rationalism and a lopsided or imbalanced subjectivity running rampant in the American church of the nineteenth century causing it to split endlessly and arrogantly reject the influence of the historic church.

Puritanism could benefit from the foundation for thought Nevin identified in the incarnation. It may be impossible to find a reference to the Puritans neglecting the incarnation as they so beautifully unfolded the glory of the atonement. Following the trail of Goodwin’s thinking combined with Nevin on the incarnation brings even greater glory to the Messiah through understanding better what was accomplished in the joining of the divine and human natures. Human helplessness and divine love come into clearer focus.

Nevin's lofty ideas may struggle to filter down to the person in the pew. But if his works create a framework in the mind of the pastor, then as Puritan practicality is employed in preaching, counsel and teaching, there will be a greater depth present, provided by perspectives such as the one afforded in this present study regarding exactly which abilities belong to the natural man and which descend down from Christ.

Puritanism's wise counsel could feed a narcissistic user and launch him into subjectivity. Nevin's promotion of the objective presence of Christ in the Scriptures and church can serve as a safeguard to those who would abuse Puritanism in that way.

Ironically, Nevin's emphasis on the reality of Christ over the letter of Scripture could be taken as license for those who wish to be free from careful examination of the very words of Scripture and to define Christ according to their own subjective imaginations. The careful attention Puritans give to each word of the text guards against just such an error.

There is a tug of war that erupts when Nevin proclaims that Christ is the key of revelation, for that seems to indicate that one must bring a preconceived knowledge of Christ to the interpretation process. This notion, of course would be countered by those who respond that Christ cannot be discovered apart from the Scriptures. One side could be guilty of eisegesis by reading into the Scriptures the type of Christ one wishes to find in them, and the other guilty of a bondage to laws about grammar and syntax which fails to recognize Christ in His fullness. Both sides are required to keep each other in tension, for proper interpretation is like a dance. Intuition is required, but that intuition is constantly being refined as Scripture is carefully analyzed.

Nevin focused on the incarnation as the key to understanding Scripture, and the Puritans considered the covenants to be that key. Which one sets God higher or raises the focus of the interpreter higher? Again, the answer need not be sought using either/or reasoning. The best solution is both/and. Covenant theology could be used in a way which draws more attention to the covenants themselves than to Christ, but it can also be used in a way to highlight the incarnation and Christ's glorious constitution as Goodwin demonstrated. On the other hand, a focus on the incarnation while ignoring the covenants ignores what is plain in Scripture.

It is difficult to understand Nevin's distaste for the decrees of God. He names the recognition of these decrees as abstractions, but in truth they function to make the Ideal known in the world of the Actual. What is richly rewarding is to embrace his sacramental sense of the Scriptures, for with it one approaches them with humble expectation and reverence, assured of Christ's presence.

Mercersburg provides philosophical ballast for the Puritan drive for holiness and godliness. It guards against a Biblicistic rationalism such as was later constructed

off of the platform of scientific methodology which resembled the Puritan's practice of parsing and collating. Puritan practicality brings the significance of the incarnation into matters of everyday life, teasing out the details of how the ideal is expressed in the actual. Both stand on "Thus says the Lord" and seek to recognize Christ as the reality of salvation. Puritans defend all Scripture being of Christ, and Nevin promotes Christ in all of Scripture. In the end, what the diversity in the two camps exposes is the richness of Holy Scripture which supports both Nevin's vindication of the objective church in his day and the celebration of the incarnation, as it does Puritan practical instruction according to the covenant structure they recognized. When both are considered together the richness of the Savior comes to even greater illumination.

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