

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 TEN

Soul Doctors Trained in Different Schools

How Puritans and Mercersburg Approached Care of the Soul

Two identical twin sons later in life developed prostate cancer at the same time. One followed a course of treatment prescribed by the most up-to-date conventional methods while the other chose an alternative, “natural” route. Some years have passed, and as of the publication of this paper, as far as is known, both are cancer free.

While such seemingly opposite approaches regarding the body’s maladies are interesting, the stakes are much higher when dealing with the soul, for if the way of healing proves false, the consequences are eternal and irreversible. Further, God the Creator of both body and soul has not issued a medical textbook. But He has issued plain directions which yield healing for the soul and promises that healing for bodies follows upon the completion of soul restoration. One cannot afford to engage in soul care which is out of step with that prescribed by the Healer.

The goal of this chapter will be to survey and summarize the works of several of the Puritans which treat care of the soul and then to consider whether the thought of the Mercersburg era opposed or complemented the earlier Puritan work. Both of these movements developed the thinking of the Reformation, yet on American soil that which came to be called Puritan and the Mercersburg thinkers became quite critical of each other. Suspicion or at the very least a mutual disinterest can exist among the two schools of thought as they still may be represented in present-day evangelical circles.

Puritan Soul Care

Overcoming Sin and Temptation by John Owen

The volume consulted was edited by Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor. By way of introduction, Kapic noted that Owen sought to present a holistic view of the human person and that he believed personality differences had to be considered when addressing sin. The problem of sin should not be approached as if it were rooted strictly in the physical body, for then the result might resemble a monastic style punishment of the body in hopes of driving sin away. Owen makes use of psychological categories of mind, will and the affections as he presents his holistic model.¹ Originally humanity's mind rightly reflected on the Creator and on the creation. Affections were properly trained on God and followed what was good. But the fall introduced disorder, the effects of which persist even after redemption.²

Kapic warns that a Christian use of psychology is problematic when it reduces humans to a compilation of mechanistic behavioral responses without considering who God is and the state of a person's relationship with Him. However, there is a danger of neglecting altogether physiological distinctions, diverse backgrounds and socio-economic factors when engaging in soul care. When those factors are acknowledged, then it becomes clear that there are significant individual differences among those who are made in God's image and universally expected to hate and reject sin and pursue righteousness. Kapic goes so far as to declare Owen's works able to be considered as early modern explorations of psychology. The Puritan under consideration keenly detected that one's constitution, education or prejudice foster "peculiar lusts" for each individual.³

Psychological considerations which assist in dissecting sin or Satan's tactics cannot in themselves yield success in the struggle against sin. The examination of sin must lead to embracing redemption in Christ, trusting divine promises and submitting to the love of God and its designs.⁴

Overcoming Sin and Temptation is actually a combining of three volumes from Owen's pen. Appearing first is "Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers" which is based on the following text of Romans 8:13 – "If you through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body you shall live." Body here refers to the flesh, meaning the corruption and depravity of our natures, indwelling sin or lust. To kill it is to take away its strength, vigor and power which is accomplished by the Holy Spirit.⁵ A contrary principle to sin must be implanted in the human heart which is regeneration. The new life is destructive toward sin and unfolds by degrees

¹ Kelly M. Kapic, "Life in the Midst of Battle: John Owen's Approach to Sin, Temptation, and the Christian Life," *Overcoming Sin & Temptation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 26.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

³ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁵ John Owen, "Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers," *Overcoming Sin & Temptation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 47-48.

toward eventual perfection in heaven. It is the believer's constant duty to mortify sin so it has no power to produce the works of the flesh. Owen explained, "The vigor, and power, and comfort of our spiritual life depends on the mortification of the deeds of the flesh."⁶

Indwelling sin will always be an issue to be addressed as long as the believer remains in this world. A believer will not be relieved from his "body of death" until death. Any who deny original sin deviate from Scripture, asserting themselves to be wiser than Scripture and inventing a righteousness which is foreign to the Gospel. Constant vigilance is called for. Owen issued this insight – "He that is appointed to kill an enemy, if he leave striking before the other ceases living, does but half his work."⁷

Indwelling sin actively seeks to destroy fellowship or communion between the believer and God. There is no safety except to engage in constant warfare against it. If it is ignored it will work to produce sins which are destructive to the soul. God grants the elect the Holy Spirit and a new nature in order to fit them for the battle. Therefore, in light of these gifts, "Not to be daily mortifying sin is to sin against the goodness, kindness, wisdom, grace, and love of God, who has furnished us with a principle of doing it."⁸

The believer's goal is to pursue perfect holiness in the fear of God (2 Corinthians 7:1), and so "He who does not kill sin in his way takes no steps toward his journey's end."⁹ This duty is not undertaken merely by forcing oneself to perform legal duties. Owen accuses the Roman Catholic Church of using spiritual disciplines as the fountain from which life flows in opposition to sin, allowing those disciplines to displace a reliance on Christ and His Spirit. Virtue cannot be produced by human works carried out in human strength alone. "Spiritually sick men cannot sweat out their distemper with working," but spiritually deceived persons may attempt to do so. Power from Almighty God is the only hope of defeating such a strong nemesis.¹⁰

The Spirit is required to transform a stubborn, proud, rebellious, unbelieving heart (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26). All mortification is communicated from Christ through the Spirit (John 15:5). The Spirit brings about mortification of sin by causing a Christian's heart to abound in grace and fruits contrary to the flesh. Galatians 5:17-23 details the fruits of the Spirit which are opposed to those of the flesh. If one abounds, the other cannot. The Spirit also acts to weaken and destroy lusts. He brings the cross of Christ into a sinner's heart by faith.¹¹

⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁷ Ibid., 50-51.

⁸ Ibid., 52-54.

⁹ Ibid., 55.

¹⁰ Ibid., 59-60.

¹¹ Ibid., 60-61, 139.

A natural question that would arise is, “if mortification is the work of the Holy Spirit, how is it that we are commanded to do it?” Philippians 2:13 reveals that God works in us to will and to do His good pleasure. So, the Holy Spirit works within the heart in a way that preserves liberty and free obedience, working in the understanding, will, conscience and affections. His work is agreeable to the believer’s human nature and not against it or without it.¹²

As for mortification of sin leading to health for the soul, “the use of means for obtaining of peace is ours; the bestowing of it is God’s prerogative.”¹³ In other words, a follower of Christ is following no mechanical formula but is fostering a relationship. Each unmortified sin will rob a soul of vigor and strength and drive it into the darkness of deprivation, cut off from peace and comfort. Unmortified sin entangles the affections and “diverts the heart from the spiritual frame that is required for vigorous communion with God.”¹⁴ Misdirected affections expel the proper love of the Father.

“Mortification is the soul’s vigorous opposition to self,”¹⁵ for lusts lead one to pursue satisfaction of self. Both the root and the fruit of besetting sins must be sought out for destruction, but with the understanding that total victory will not be achieved in this lifetime.¹⁶ Owen cautions that some are by nature not given to violence, unruly passions or wild and disordered affections, but a quiet, sedate nature is not the same as mortification. Foul conditions still exist in the heart even if a more refined outward appearance is on display.¹⁷

Mortification is different than diverting sin such as Simon Magus did for a season as recorded in the book of Acts. While he was diverted from sorceries, his hearts still fostered covetousness and sinful ambition. Similarly, a man in old age may abandon youthful lusts, but if they were never mortified, they will simply be diverted to a new form.¹⁸

The first step of mortification is the weakening of a habit or lust so that intensity and/or frequency begin to diminish. Since lust is strengthened by temptation, temptation must be cut off. If the fruit of an evil tree is beaten down but the root remains, more fruit will grow once again.¹⁹

There is no death of sin without the death of Christ. First John 3:8 states that Jesus died to destroy the works of the devil. Titus 2:14 says He gave Himself to redeem us from iniquity and purify us so that we would be zealous for good

¹² Ibid., 62.

¹³ Ibid., 64.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 66.

¹⁶ Ibid., 69.

¹⁷ Ibid., 70.

¹⁸ Ibid., 71.

¹⁹ Ibid., 74-76.

works. Everywhere in Scripture, purging, washing and cleansing are credited to the shed blood of Christ (1 John 1:7; Hebrews 1:3; Revelation 1:5). He has killed sin with respect to its reign in believers.²⁰ Therefore a prerequisite for success in the battle against sin is that a person must be grafted into Christ by faith. The agency of the Spirit is required to enable participation in or union with Christ.²¹ Owen offers this counsel to an unregenerate person – “You set yourself against a particular sin and do not consider that you are nothing but sin.”²²

Mortification of a particular sin must be pursued in the context of attacking all sins simultaneously. It would be counterproductive to tend to a particular sore on the body while neglecting the overall health of the body. Attacking only one sin raises suspicion that sin is only being hated because of ill consequences it may produce and not simply because it is sin.²³

Another essential ingredient in the battle against indwelling sin is to retain an abiding sense of love from Christ by way of His cross. This will fuel a hatred for all sorts of sins, not just those which bear troubling results. In this way a believer is prevented from battling sin from motives of self-love.²⁴ A Gospel-activated person treasures communion with God and fears to enter into any practice which would jeopardize that.²⁵

It is helpful to have awareness that God may permit a struggle with lust in order to bring about an overall course correction in life. An out-of-control lust may signal deeper problems, perhaps indicating a careless, negligent, haphazard course of spiritual life in general.²⁶

The later part of the work then engages in practical directions such as focusing on self-abasement in meditation, making careful note of the conditions which triggered an occasion for sin, reacting strongly to the very first impulses you feel toward a sin, etc.

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²⁰ Ibid., 136-138.

²¹ Ibid., 79-80.

²² Ibid., 84.

²³ Ibid., 87.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 93.

²⁶ Ibid., 88.

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