

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 TEN (Cont.)

The Almost Christian Discovered: The False Professor Tried and Cast by
Matthew Mead

Mead agrees with Owen regarding the deceitful condition of the heart, asserting that the heart of man is the greatest impostor and cheat in the world. Every grace can be counterfeited. Some may make high profession of faith and yet never have been truly converted. One who boasts of having obtained great privileges in Christ should also produce great fruit.¹

Early in this volume in an opening address to the reader, Mead offers five duties for those who would take care for the state of their souls. First, one should take heed of the possibility of resting in a form of godliness in which grace is conferred merely by participation in formal, lifeless duties. Second, believers should strive to realize in themselves the power, beauty and loveliness of Christ, or His holiness. Third, consider what is yet to come as the greatest reality. Such a posture of expectation will properly shape the affections and prevent the elevation of creatures into the place only God should occupy in the human heart. Fourth, properly value the soul and do not sacrifice it as Esau so easily sacrificed his birthright. Treasure it as the most beautiful piece of God's workmanship because it bears His image and was purchased at the price of God's Son. Be on guard against allowing the perishable body and its desires to be elevated above the precious soul. And fifth, meditate on the severity and suddenness of the coming judgment in which every person will give an account for all that was entrusted to him or her, whether time or strength, affections, mercies, relationships or the means of grace. An individual who does not live as if lust must be mortified or self denied or Scripture believed or God served or the soul valued actually is under the influence of a spirit of atheism.²

¹ Matthew Mead, *The Almost Christian Discovered: The False Professor Tried and Cast* (Ames, IA: International Outreach, Inc., 2013), 5-6.

² *Ibid.*, 8-11.

A recurring reference for Mead is the parable of the virgins which he interprets as depicting Christians who genuinely made profession of faith and some (the five foolish virgins) who made profession of faith but lacked the quality of faith so as to keep their profession alive.³ The book contains encouragement to evaluate the quality of one's own faith. A person may know much of God and His will, along with knowing much of Christ and His ways, and yet only be almost a Christian. Much knowledge will be taken to hell in unbelievers.⁴

One may possess distinguished gifts, even spiritual gifts and yet remain almost a Christian. Judas preached and cast out demons, showing it is possible to employ gifts which are given for the benefit of others, without possessing grace which would be distinguished by sincerity and integrity. A person with a disability can point another in a right direction as Judas did, even if he lacks the mobility to go there himself. Gifts sometimes adorn those who are hell bound, who are not truly in union with Christ.⁵

One can go far in outwardly opposing sin and be almost a Christian. He may show signs of conviction and be convinced sin is bad such as King Saul and Esau demonstrated, yet were not converted. Hell will contain mourning for sin, but not a mourning unto life. There are those who confess sins in a time of trouble with the intensity of mariners who throw cargo overboard in the time of a storm, yet later they wish they had it back. Mead says that confession should come freely like water out of a spring and not in a forced manner as fluid expelled by the fire of a still. True confession includes a desire to abandon sinful practice. As Owen had pointed out, Simon Magus abandoned witchcraft yet was almost a Christian. The root of the rule or dominion of sin remained in his heart. Mead clarifies the situation regarding the heart with these words – “It is a less evil to do sin, and not to love it, than to love sin and not do it.” “Sin in the affection is worse than sin in the conversation.” A chained dog is still a dog even if it is never let loose to devour. True hatred of sin involves hating it as a violation of God's majesty and not just because it induces personal shame or hard consequences.⁶

If one makes great vows and promises and openly demonstrates strong resolutions, this likewise is no proof of genuine Christianity. Someone may seem to delight in the Word of God, being an active member in a church and yet be almost a Christian. Added to the list of evidences of faith that can be counterfeited are fostering great hopes of heaven, engaging religious work with zeal (false zeal is often imbalanced or lopsided like appearing to love God but hating a neighbor or the Pharisees carefully tithing herbs or observing ceremonies but neglecting other duties such as honoring Jesus; or it can be reckless and prone to error like Jehu was zealous against evil but not zealous for

³ Ibid., 19-20.

⁴ Ibid., 24-25.

⁵ Ibid., 25-29.

⁶ Ibid., 33-39.

God), and praying a great deal (again the hypocritical Pharisees provide an example).⁷

The prayer of a genuine believer is according to God's will, rooted in a sense of personal emptiness and God's infinite fullness, and is focused more on spiritual things than on temporal. There is such a thing as worship borne out of nature instead of grace. In other words, some may pray much out of a natural predisposition to prayer. Before conversion Augustine prayed much against sin but with fear that God would answer that prayer. Receiving an answer to prayer is not in itself proof of being a true Christian since there are times God answers in judgment.⁸

Mead continues to build the diagnostic list for self-examination. One may remain almost a Christian even if he should suffer much for Christ. "Love to Christ is the only noble ground of suffering," not earning merit or garnering praise from others.⁹

A person classified as almost Christian may attest to sensing a call from God (again, think of Judas), but not being inwardly transformed the response to that call would be of nature and not out of grace. Going further, a man or woman may have the Spirit of God and yet be almost Christian. Think of Balaam. What is specifically required for salvation is regeneration and renewal of the heart from the Spirit. Otherwise, the Spirit's work in a person is only temporary. It is possible to receive gifts of the Spirit without graces from Him, or to have illumination but not sanctification, conviction without conversion. The unpardonable sin is sinning against the Holy Spirit. This implies one must have received the Holy Spirit in some measure before being able to sin against Him.¹⁰

Possessing faith is not of itself a proof of salvation. Here reference the stony ground in the parable of the sower. There is a level of faith which believes the facts of the Bible but does not actually trust Christ for salvation. Thus it is rooted in the understanding but not in the will. This state enables one to taste salvation but yet not be a Christian. Likewise, love for God's people is not in itself proof of salvation. Nor is strict outward compliance with the law (think of the rich young ruler who approached Jesus). A carnal heart can be disciplined to obey commands but will not freely love God. As in the above categories, there is a natural version of sanctification and a special, effective, gracious version. The true version affects the understanding, will, conscience and affections and not just outer behavior. Mead elaborates by employing the analogy of soul and body – inner and outer – and that both are required in order to compose a whole.¹¹

⁷ Ibid., 40, 47, 49, 52-54, 56-57.

⁸ Ibid., 56-59.

⁹ Ibid., 59-60.

¹⁰ Ibid., 61-63.

¹¹ Ibid., 64-67, 69, 71-74.

But why would some be driven far in compliance to outward duties if not true believers? Because of conscience which retains the knowledge that there is a God who should be worshiped and served. While only some have grace, all have conscience. Conscience can be stimulated much by the means of grace to be enlightened and regulated, but not renewed and converted. Hypocrisy has the likeness of grace but without the life of grace. The natural man labors to calm the conscience, not to grow nearer to Christ and to mortify sin. He does not retain a sense of unworthiness and humility but is pleased with his own work, in effect, making himself his own savior. All waters that run from the sea started there; likewise, when a person's duties terminate in herself, they originated there and not from supernatural grace. A natural man pursues personal improvement but not holiness. Duty fulfilled by a drive coming from the natural conscience will fade because it is growing out of a dying root. In contrast, what grows from Christ comes to maturity. The weakest grace will outlive the greatest display of gifts rooted in nature. The leather on a shoe wears out but the skin on the sole of one who goes barefoot does not. Why? Because the skin of the foot is alive and is constantly being renewed. The leather is dead and only gets thinner. Without the life of Christ, the apparent good produced by nature will wear down.¹²

Another reason those who are not Christian go so far in that direction under the auspices of nature is that the Word of God has power to reform even if the subject is not supernaturally reformed within. It exercises a discerning and discovering power which exposes what a person truly is. The power of the law of God can bind consciences and awaken fears of judgment. A natural response would be to convert oneself to religion in a desire to find salvation. This is a degree of the natural instinct toward self-preservation and not a sign of supernatural saving grace.¹³

Belonging to natural convictions as opposed to gracious convictions would be psychology and philosophy. These can only carry a person so far in the direction of salvation. They stop short of producing grief over the very vileness of sin or at the dishonor done to God when His will is violated. Psychology and philosophy give opportunity to man to see himself as naturally beautiful and fail to perceive the deformity of sin. Mead describes the true believer with these words – “He lives in his obedience, but he doth not live upon his obedience, but upon Christ and His righteousness.” He holds the glory of God to be the chief end of all duties performed.¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 78, 81-87.

¹³ Ibid., 87-88.

¹⁴ Ibid., 109-110.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).