

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 (Cont.)

The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment by Jeremiah Burroughs

This work is launched by Philippians 4:11 – “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.” Burroughs sees the duty, glory and excellence of a Christian to be gaining skill and having mastery of the mystery of Christian contentment which he defines as “that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”¹

Inward indicates it is more than outward self-restraint. It is inward submission of the heart to wait on God.² Again there must be the harmony between the inner and outer life which the previously surveyed Puritan soul doctors also addressed.

Stillness of heart does not mean complete inactivity. There must be a continual calling out to God in need along with a dissolving of one’s own will into God’s. In this way murmuring and discontent are laid aside, as are fretting and wild, unruly affections careening out of control, grasping in desperation for satisfaction while neglecting duties at hand.³

Mere outward arguments cannot produce contentment. It is instead contingent on the state of the soul. Nothing material can create contentment if the heart is out of sorts. Nor can true contentment, once established, be uprooted by a change in external circumstances.⁴

According to the definition offered by Burroughs, contentment is a *gracious* frame of spirit. Grace once again is contrasted to nature. Some are naturally disposed to be quiet and calm, full of sturdy resolve and self-discipline when facing trials.

¹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013, rpt.), 19.

² *Ibid.*, 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

Likewise, contentment, being dependent on supernatural grace, is more than scientific explanation or natural reason can provide which can sometimes temporarily seem to pacify a disturbed heart. A distinguishing mark of gracious contentment versus natural tendencies toward quietness is that what is produced by grace will be zealous to sanctify God's Name in the midst of afflictions, something for which a naturally quiet person would lack zeal. Thus refraining from murmuring is not the entire goal of contentment. Praising God is.⁵

Contentment freely submits to and finds pleasure in God's will. This is different from a passive resignation that none can resist the will of God. It acts freely and not by forcing oneself, and it recognizes the goodness of God even in the midst of affliction.⁶

There is mystery in providence in that one can simultaneously be the most contented man in the world and the most unsatisfied. That is, one can be satisfied with a low condition in this world but not satisfied with the enjoyment that belongs to this world because her heart has been enlarged and the whole world cannot fill it. Burroughs pronounced that "a soul that is capable of God can be filled with nothing else but God." A carnal heart strives for outward peace, while a gracious heart seeks more than the peace of God. It seeks the God of peace. That is, it learns to enjoy the God who grants peace, grasping for the Cause and not merely the effects He provides.⁷

A second mystery related to contentment is that "a Christian comes to contentment, not so much by way of addition, as by way of subtraction," that is, not adding to one's condition but subtracting from his desires, asking the Lord to refashion the heart.⁸ Burroughs compounds the sense of mystery by then adding that "a Christian comes to contentment, not so much by getting rid of the burden that is on him, as by adding another burden to himself." That burden is to gain a sense of the load of sin that is borne and then humble oneself before God in the light of this fresh realization. This will change one's perspective on her condition in the world. Burroughs taught that a broken estate and a hard heart are a bad combination, but a broken estate and a broken heart properly suit each other.⁹

Further, contentment comes, not so much by the removal of affliction as by its being transformed. The carnal heart struggles to believe that any good can come about except by the removal of an affliction. The gracious heart believes God can turn the affliction into good and produce spiritual benefit. Here Ambrose is quoted – "Even poverty itself is riches to holy men."¹⁰

⁵ Ibid., 29-30.

⁶ Ibid., 31-32, 34.

⁷ Ibid., 42-44.

⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁹ Ibid., 47-49.

¹⁰ Ibid., 49.

Contentment comes not by making up the lack in a gracious man's circumstances but by attending diligently to duty in the midst of them. Even if a carnal man's circumstances were amended, that would still not create contentment in his heart. What is required is for the gracious-hearted man's will and desires to melt into God's will and desires, as he embraces God as his greatest good. After one's will melts into God's, then the reality sets in that if God has glory, he also has glory. If God has riches, he has riches. If God is satisfied, he is satisfied. God becomes all in all for the believer.¹¹

A Christian becomes conscious of God's love in afflictions as well as in mercies. Jerome said, "He is a happy man who is beaten when the stroke is a stroke of love." A godly man realizes that afflictions are sanctified in Christ and thus the sting and venom are removed. All afflictions are designed to draw the believer closer to God.¹² He calls on Christ for strength, knowing that the Savior has already endured the pains of this world, and he keeps the covenant promises of God before him. He trusts in God's providence, coming to understand that God may send the lowest condition for a time on those whom He has determined to show the greatest mercy (recall David's desperate condition at times before becoming king). God works to turn the greatest evil into the greatest good.¹³

"No one shall ever come to Heaven, but the soul which has Heaven come to it first," wrote Burroughs. While external troubles may afflict, the kingdom of heaven resides within. "A carnal man has little contentment in his own spirit." Like a bottle that is full makes less sound when it is struck than one which is empty, an empty heart will likewise make more noise (complaining and whining) when afflicted than one that is full of grace and goodness.¹⁴

The way of learning contentment begins with self-denial. When a sinner realizes he is nothing, he is then ready to receive God's free grace. Likewise he realizes he deserves nothing good and can of himself do nothing good. In fact, being so corrupt by sin, he cannot receive good. Even more than being an empty vessel he is a corrupt and unclean vessel that would spoil whatever was poured into it. He is incapable of making use of what God would give him unless God constantly works graciously in him. It is worse to be contrary of all good than to be merely void of all good. Sinners are not empty pitchers but are filled with poison. How is this low view of self significant? "A man who is little in his own eyes will account every affliction as little, and every mercy as great." "There was never any man or woman so contented as a self-denying man or woman." No one ever denied himself as much as Jesus who entered permanent contentment.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., 51-54, 67.

¹² Ibid., 60-61.

¹³ Ibid., 116-117.

¹⁴ Ibid., 75, 77.

¹⁵ Ibid., 86-89.

A selfish person filled with self-love will be glad when she receives things which serve her own purposes, but someone who is godly will be glad when God's purposes are served. Delight comes from God's successes. The believer must come to learn that "there is nothing in the creature that is suitable for a gracious heart to feed upon for its good and happiness."¹⁶ Contentment does not arise from having more of the world but from delight in God's will.

In the school of Christ, the student of contentment will give much place to weighty matters of eternity and gaining peace with and pardon from God. Earthly troubles will then take their rightful, much smaller place in contrast. He will learn also that this world is not his true home, so troubles here will not follow into eternity. Wealth and comfort the world affords are profitable only with reference to God who is the first, infinite, supreme good of all. The goal is not to enjoy things as much as to enjoy God in them and to honor Him by or with them.¹⁷

Gaining this perspective, one then learns that it would be a dreadful evil to be given over to one's own natural heart's desires. Bernard recognized being given over in such a way to be "one of the most hideous judgments in the world."¹⁸ The plague of a hard heart would be greater than any outward affliction.

Contentment gives God worship as His people lay themselves before Him for Him to do as He pleases with them. Such submission is the soul's truest worship. Active worship engages in what pleases God, and passive worship takes pleasure in what He does.¹⁹ This worship is a foretaste of heaven with its rest and contentment.²⁰ God's glory is to be happy and self-sufficient in Himself. One who partakes of the divine nature shares this quality of contentment, having God as a portion even if all creatures might be removed. By contentment the soul then comes to an excellence that bears likeness to God in heaven.²¹

Burroughs found it important to include a substantial section addressing murmuring because discontent is an indicator of corruption in the soul, making a murmuring spirit a greater evil than any external affliction.²² The instruction given is thorough and practical and profitable. The book then concludes with wise counsel on how to move from a state of being discontent into contentment.

¹⁶ Ibid., 90-91.

¹⁷ Ibid., 92-93, 96-97, 99.

¹⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹⁹ Ibid., 119-120.

²⁰ Ibid., 132.

²¹ Ibid., 134-135.

²² Ibid., 137-138.

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