

## **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.)**

##### **In Conclusion**

The Puritans and the Mercersburg theologians both had much to say about the way to find wholeness and peace for the soul. The approach of each had a role to fill in the context of their respective eras, and each continues to contribute useful direction for followers of Christ in the present day. Both saw freedom as consisting of submission to the divine will. Such submission necessitates making war on indwelling sin. It calls for careful attention to the role of feelings and imagination. It requires some knowledge of the role of grace in trumping nature. It calls one to a deeper life of pure thinking and the quest for divine contentment. It holds that the incarnation and the atonement are the ground upon which any expectation is founded that souls can live and flourish.

It is impossible to study the Bible's teaching on soul care without the entrance of philosophy into one's considerations, since philosophy is like a computer program always running in the background as human thought processes. But if philosophy eclipses the teaching of Scripture, souls will wither and faint as they search in vain for the power to keep and satisfy them. If philosophy is downplayed, soul care may turn into a shallow pursuit that focuses on the specific perceived needs and desires of an individual and fails to consider that person as a part of history, a part of the wider church, and a part of a world overrun with counterfeit philosophies which need to be confronted. Philosophy can cause a person to expand her view of the soul which in turn then opens the door to discover how truly multifaceted the Savior presented in the Holy Scriptures really is in the all-encompassing salvation He provides. Theology can inject into philosophy a connection with the personal God of the universe who has assumed responsibility for the welfare of souls, thereby rendering philosophy alive and useful over and above the speculations emanating from natural imagination. In other words, philosophy may supply questions to help the theologian grasp the wonder of the answers he possesses in Holy Scripture, and Biblical, orthodox theology can supply the glory that could never be achieved by even the grandest conceptions the natural mind can conceive. Philosophy such

as Hegel's provides optimism for the future but lacks the stability of being rooted in the providential guidance of the personal Creator who determines the end from the beginning and to whom one can safely surrender to find contentment and meaning.

The place to start in soul care is with the knowledge of God. The Puritans offer that plainly and with power as they were gifted so beautifully to make application of the very Word of the transcendent God to human life. While Mercersburg did not contradict the Puritans or challenge what they identified as constituting orthodoxy, perhaps the usefulness of these two distinct movements can be summed up by a repeated theme in the work of Nevin's colleague at Mercersburg, Philip Schaff, who said regarding certain controversies in the church which fostered heated opposition between two sides, that the perfection of both is the union of both. There is within that statement a hint of carryover from Hegel. While Hegel embraced contradiction and thus discarded logic, that is not necessary to do with the Puritans and Mercersburg for while there are elements that cause discomfort or irritation to the opposite side, each has something worthwhile to contribute, and regarding soul care neither brings to the table elements which would undo the fundamental beliefs of the other. Absolute truth does not evolve, but it does have more than one application, so it may appear oddly in differing contexts and ages to those who are used to seeing it only in one tradition. Each can help guard the other from apostasy or falling into an ingrown orthodoxy that fails to work to relate truth to the culture around.

In all things may the Shepherd of souls gain glory for Himself by leading His people into wholeness through union with Him, rescuing from what deceives and harms.

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