

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 ELEVEN

Conclusion

One who might wish to survey how the offspring of the Reformed Church have developed in the centuries after the Reformation may when comparing Puritanism and the Mercersburg theology note that there is enough likeness to conclude they did indeed share common ancestry. For example, Marshall and his emphasis on union with Christ or Goodwin's highlighting the necessity of the incarnation demonstrate a shared interest with Nevin and Schaff on those same topics.

Neither strand is whole and complete in itself, and were a family reunion to be held where long-separated kin could be reacquainted, the result may be quite enriching. Puritanism's overwhelmingly fruitful use of Scripture is foundational in bringing believers to maturity, while Mercersburg's critical and selective use of philosophy opens the door for those mature believers to grasp how the Gospel can impact all areas of life and culture.

One can cover the other's weakness. Mercersburg's emphasis on the objective presence of the life of Christ in the church and sacraments can rescue one who would misuse the beautiful personal appropriation of Scripture to develop holiness, making it into an overly subjective and introspective undertaking. Yet for all of Mercersburg's emphasis on the church, its liturgy and sacraments as a centerpiece of Christian living and thriving in the world, and for all its effort to guard against a runaway subjectivity, if the idea of church is not the product of the type of careful Scripture explication of the Puritans, the door is left open for a different kind of subjectivity to enter the picture – a subjectivity in which the believer brings with him or her homespun ideas of what the church is and then runs all of Scripture through that filter.

Nevin's loyalty to German philosophy created confusion when dealing with election, a confusion cleared up by Puritan covenant theology. His claims that the Heidelberg Catechism was not in continuity with the decrees of God in covenant

theology proved false. Yet at times the seeming disagreements between the two movements can be explained by the differing contexts in which they ministered and the different foes they faced, just as Paul and James seem to be opposed in their epistles on the role of works in relation to justification but were not. The Puritans faced a dead and lifeless formalism that was robbing the church of holiness, while Mercersburg engaged a church that seemed to be alive but was drawing life from natural and not gracious sources. Puritans had to recover a healthy subjectivity in the face of an oppressive objectivity, and Mercersburg had to recover the necessary objective presence of Christ in the church and sacraments as demonstrated in church history in order to counter a subjectivity which was tearing the church apart. That runaway subjectivity continues to threaten the church in the same ways Nevin and Schaff observed – a rationalism which embraces doctrine over Christ or emotional experientialism which eclipses Christ. Many today view the church as a voluntary organization and do not grasp its significance as the locus for the life of Christ, a divinely instituted body in vital union with its Head.

It would be difficult to disciple a believer with Nevin's writings. But it would be difficult to see pastoral training yield healthy results in the long term without considering the issues he raised. It is possible a student of the Puritans could turn into the path of a low regard for the church and liturgy and sacraments and thus fail to rest in the objective assurance of grace available in the church, constantly circling the field of assurance without being able to land. On the other hand, it is possible a student of Mercersburg could develop such a love for philosophy and the idea of church that careful study of Scripture and the doctrines related to each verse begin to fade and soon the orthodox definitions of faith and doctrine may be exchanged for new ones which are influenced by the culture. A dead formalism could then set in. If both sides were allied, perhaps a liturgical, sacramental church, rich in expository preaching and practical counsel, free as a congregationalist and yet bound by an understanding of the history of the church, could be developed. Not all liturgy is dead formalism. Nevin's point is well taken that the church's objective liturgy, when it honors Scripture and respects the tradition of the historic church, trains believers in a healthy subjectivity. It would be a mistake to attempt to foster the life of Christ in an individual who is cut off from the life of Christ in the church.

Some may see it necessary to pit the magnificent emphasis on the atonement by the Puritans against the wonderfully refreshing emphasis on the incarnation by Mercersburg. Would it not be more profitable to embrace both in order to develop a robust, full-orbed understanding of the divine work of redemption?

Nevin neither conflated justification and sanctification nor abandoned forensic justification. He did not actually desire less than legal imputation as he was accused of, but instead argued for more. Owen saw justification as a participation in the righteousness of God. Nevin pressed forward to include a participation in Christ. Nor were the seventeenth-century Puritans guilty of most of what Nevin

accused them of committing. The attacks he leveled against “Puritans” were actually directed toward the heirs of the New England Puritans of his own day who deserved much of his harsh critiques. His actual references to the earlier Puritans showed much in common with them and much appreciation for certain of their emphases.

God be praised for the richness and diversity present in the orthodox, Reformed faith which comes to light through varying contexts and by engaging various philosophies contemporary with each era. Neither branch of the Reformed church considered in this paper is yet perfected, but as Christ leads, one may benefit from the other and all come to maturity for the glory of God. May the union of both be the perfection of both.

In keeping with the practice of the Puritans who frequently ended their various works with a list of uses for the study they were concluding, the following list of uses is meant to better capture the elements in play in this dissertation and to frame them in terms of the benefit of the material for the life of the church presently.

Use 1. Each tradition within the body of Christ should hold allegiance to itself with humility, ready to investigate the claims to truth of its rivals and realizing that there is some error contained in its own established system. Those who are very proud of their Puritan lineage to the point of engaging in ecclesiastical snobbery and condemning anything Mercersburg without taking the time to examine it risk becoming ingrown and self-validating in a way that may limit fruitfulness. Likewise, those who develop a love for Mercersburg theology to the exclusion of anything Puritan may drift far from the blessed Biblical teaching God fostered in His church during the seventeenth century.

Use 2. Both objectivism and subjectivism can be done poorly in the context of the church. Either can become oppressive and hinder the life of Christ which would manifest itself among members. It is more dangerous to have subjectivism without objectivism than it is to have the objective in place and be weak on subjectivism, for what is subjective must properly be a response to the objective. A proper response to oppressive objectivism is not to abandon objectivism but to search for a Biblically objective model of the church which forms the basis for all subjective, personal development of the believer.

Use 3. Philosophy is not to be completely avoided as inherently evil. God has revealed Himself in the natural world to natural man. While that aspect of revelation is not complete and is prone to subjective and imaginative and even heretical impulses, to appropriate philosophy into a thoroughly Biblical system can be useful, for it opens the mind to the many-faceted wonder of the persons and works of the Trinity. However, when philosophy is afforded too high a position of prominence, it can bring confusion and muddy the theological waters, as with Nevin’s handling of election. Or if pursuit of philosophy becomes an

attempt to grasp for wisdom God has not revealed about Himself, it will result in idolatry. Philosophy is capable both of fatally diluting Christianity and serving as a means to connect it with the life of the world in its trek to conquer the world. It can awaken the Christian imagination to realize the many-splendored glory of redemption. Without theology, philosophy cannot establish connection with God.

Use 4. Since Christ is present in this world in the Church which is His body, the study of church history stands immediately under the inspired Word of God in terms of usefulness in understanding the will of God. Pastors who are willingly ignorant of church history run the risk of unwittingly attempting to reinvent the Church according to their own fancies or the popular whims of their times. Such a short-sighted approach to ministry can produce malformed sectarian fruit which damages the unity of the Church. It is dangerous to forget that Christ promised to be with the Church in every age. Such neglect could lead to discarding much useful material which could assist in continuing the Church toward maturity.

Use 5. A second look should be taken at the fear surrounding the high view of sacraments in the historic church. As Witsius claimed, sacraments are symbols which confirm promises and call men to their duty. But they are more, and recognizing the objective force of the sacraments does not automatically lead to popery. There is danger in assigning a magical or superstitious value to them, but there is danger also in regarding them as memorials devoid of the mystical presence of Christ. That would leave the believer with less opportunity to touch heaven and may reduce any opportunities to interact with heavenly things to be strictly personal, ridding the church of a mediating role. Once union with Christ is restricted to the personal arena, subjectivity becomes emboldened to the extent the church is viewed as a band of volunteers who mutually decide to gather rather than the body of Christ which He has appointed to share His life together. This type of runaway subjectivism robs the believer of comfort and depth in the spiritual formation process and can leave a believer obsessing about his own spiritual state rather than providing a concrete avenue to receive from God assurance of His covenant promises. Church membership is precious because it can indicate real participation in the life of Christ.

Use 6. It is not necessary to belong to an organized denomination with a hierarchical structure, but it is not a sin to hold membership in such a body. Those who would be independent must be connected to the historic church through study and must be connected to colleagues informally in order to foster the love of Christ and His Body that the Spirit implants in believers' hearts. It is possible to be structurally independent and yet connectional, banding together with other like-minded congregations.

Use 7. Using liturgy out of convenience because one is too lazy to grapple with Scripture and engage God from the heart dishonors Christ and fails to feed a flock the best spiritual food. But using liturgy as a means to be mindful of the otherness of God, to establish a sense of reverence, and to train the believer to

engage in private, subjective worship is quite profitable. Therefore, liturgy is not good or bad in itself. The heart determines its usefulness or detriment.

Use 8. While there is danger in going beyond what God authorizes in worship as regards liturgy, there is danger in going beyond what God authorizes in worship as regards revivalism. Employing established tradition of the historic Church in worship can become dead formalism or it can serve as a vehicle to move the truth of Scripture forward through the ages, creating a connection between the present-day Church and those who have gone before. Employing new inventions, such as those employed in the hopes of winning souls, without regard to what God has authorized, while more exciting and livelier in appearance, may be promoting a subjectivism which empowers would-be believers to trust their experiences rather than in the Holy Spirit and to worship their feelings and the methods which induced them rather than Christ.

Use 9. It is not often helpful to construct theology on what is not stated in a creed or catechism. Nevin attempted to demonstrate how the Heidelberg Catechism was not conducive to covenant theology based on what it did not say, but a study of the work of Ursinus and Olevianus proved otherwise.

Use 10. The doctrine of union with Christ is the center and ground of all other doctrines of salvation. Faith, repentance, adoption, reconciliation, justification, sanctification, all flow from the believer's participation in Christ. While there is great benefit to contemplating each in turn, to try to scientifically separate them would be to risk reducing them to a mechanical process rather than an organic life that is shared by believers and their Head, Jesus. Viewing justification strictly in terms of being forensic neglects the organic aspect Scripture includes regarding the believer's new standing in Christ. The Puritans did not argue for forensic justification apart from union with Christ.

Use 11. Neither Mercersburg nor Puritanism alone can guarantee the church will not abandon the orthodox faith. Mercersburg's emphasis on the church as the life of Christ and on Jesus as the key to the interpretation of Scripture opens the door for subjective impressions of what those terms mean prior to approaching Scripture to interpret it. Thus, the door would be left open for the church to abandon the orthodox faith by inventing new meanings for old terms and subjecting Scripture to the lens produced by those new terms. On the other hand, Puritanism's emphasis on an individual's personal grasp of Scripture can be used to downplay the significance of the Church as that which brings orthodox truth forward from age to age and can further open the door to dangerous private interpretations of Scripture untethered from the historic Church. Both extremes could rob the Church of power. The perspectives of Mercersburg and Puritanism could well safeguard each other.

Use 12. Mysticism is dangerous when it departs from Scripture and seeks an unmediated experience of God's presence, but useful if it drives believers to

partake of the humanity of Christ mediated (and not merely represented by) the Holy Spirit.

Use 13. The Mercersburg theologians did not conflate justification and sanctification or Christ and the Church. Nor did seventeenth century Puritans promote sectarianism. Before caricaturing either movement, consideration must be allowed for the abuses each movement was addressing in its own time.

Use 14. The incarnation bears a sacramental quality in that the divine and human, the invisible and the visible were brought together in Jesus. This takes nothing away from the atonement as if the two events could be placed in competition. Instead, it illuminates the glory of the atonement by which believers come to partake of the divine nature through union with Christ's humanity.

Use 15. Inward spirituality should not be understood to be automatically pitted against outward. "Spirit" should not be thought to be intrinsically locked in conflict with form. Both sides can be wrongly pursued in opposition to the other or in bypassing Scripture (either relying on an inner light or empty formalism). The mere fact that both could be pursued poorly does not mean they cannot be pursued Biblically and function in conjunction with each other.

Use 16. There is room in the church for both intuitive, thematic thinkers like Nevin (as Evans defined him) and great systematizers like the Puritans.

Use 17. Teaching that is most filled with Scripture bears within it more power than other forms of religious thinking and is more readily applied to the believer in the pew who wishes to live in communion with God. This does not mean that philosophical considerations are of no use.

Use 18. Philosophy can helpfully tackle such issues as how the human will can be ruled by something beyond itself and at the same time be autonomic. What the Puritans mined from Scripture was how to enjoy the sweetness of God. For all Nevin's desire to avoid abstractions when speaking of union with God, the Puritans exhibited a passionate push to lay hold of and revel in the objective beauty of God in the Gospel and of Christ in heaven. Ironically, one can become abstract in explaining the desire to refute abstractions or rationalistic while combating rationalism. Yet in holding that participation in Christ is strengthened by participation in the Lord's Supper, Nevin (along with Marshall from the Puritan side) helped guard against a rationalism some could employ if misusing the covenantal system promoted in Puritanism as if doctrine itself could save.

Use 19. Separation from erring believers is at times justified when there are no avenues remaining to pursue reform, but a schismatic heart dishonors Christ. Exclusive polarization at times creates unhealthy either/or dynamics – e.g., a holy congregation versus a congregation with beautiful forms in liturgy. Would a both/and dynamic not be more helpful in some cases? The both/and dynamic

could not, of course, be used to accommodate both heresy and orthodoxy, what is opposed to Scripture and plainly revealed truth.

Use 20. A proper hermeneutic cannot exist without a scientific or analytical grasp of Scripture, but it includes more than that. Similarly, the church cannot exist without individual believers who each encounter God privately and experimentally, but it is more than a collection of such individuals.

Use 21. Meditating on the cross is a powerful means to make war on sin and finding freedom for the soul. Grasping the incarnation is crucial for learning one's new identity and calling, living in hope. Meditating on both the atonement and incarnation opens the door for the most robust display of God's glory in a believer's understanding and life.

Use 22. One of the most significant dangers to the church is any movement which is not intent on finding Christ in the Scriptures and instead subjectively appropriates them to their own ends. A second great danger is when a group seeks Christ but does not carefully allow the Scriptures to define what constitutes such a search.

Use 23. Sin is dangerous in that it destines one to an eternal experience of destruction, but also because it robs a person of true liberty to act according to God's original design for both soul and body as it prevents the ideal of infinite spirit from manifesting itself in the real experience of human life by the will willingly conforming to divine law. This conformity renounces self-love, is rooted in holy love for God and can only be authored graciously by the Holy Spirit.

Use 24. The power of the Gospel is a marvel as by it the Holy Spirit gathers believers from different contexts and varying abilities and aims them toward heaven, bringing them into union with Christ, meshing together their developing theology and their evolving attempts to confront the errors of their day as Jesus directs the Church to maturity.

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