

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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APPENDIX

A Brief Survey of Struggles with Liturgy in Both Movements

One of the early representatives of Puritanism who influenced other noteworthies was William Perkins. In his “A Warning Against the Idolatry of the Last Times” he opens with a recognition that God has blessed England richly which should obligate the nation to refine worship and rid it of idolatry.¹ He makes clear that Protestantism and Papism are not the same since no true Protestant would babble a few words according to a disciplined schedule without understanding what they meant and think it is profitable. By idolatry he meant anything which would draw one’s heart away from the true God. Specifically, he noted three types of idols, beginning with the misconception of God or Christ. That is, when God or Christ are conceived of in a way other than they are revealed in the Scriptures, then such worship originates in the imagination and not from the Spirit of God. Included in this category of idolatry would be conceiving of God as other than Trinity or Jesus as other than existing in two natures (1 John 2:23; Ephesians 2:12).² This type of idolatry ensnares many who believe themselves to be Christians as they imagine God to be something according to their own liking and tastes.

Perkins reasons that transubstantiation falls into this idolatrous realm since those who embrace it claim that Jesus’ body is both of the substance of Mary and of flour and the accompanying ingredients for bread also. The Scriptures nowhere teach that sins are forgiven because the priest holds the Savior in his hands but because Christ appears before the Father in heaven, having completed a once-for-all sacrifice, never having to be repeated.³ Also idolatrous because not found in Scripture is the notion that human satisfaction must be made to coincide with Christ’s sacrifice in order to cover temporal punishment since the Savior has

¹ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins* Volume 7, edited by Shawn D. Wright and Andrew S. Ballitch, general editors Joel R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 413, 415.

² *Ibid.*, 420-421.

³ *Ibid.*, 422.

removed eternal punishment. Then can be added the idea of humans in the church making laws which are as binding as God's law, depending on the intercession or merit of saints, or ascribing to the pope the authority to forgive sins.⁴

A second style of idolatry according to Perkins is when God is worshiped in a way other than prescribed in His Word. Israel was to be careful not to introduce elements of Baal worship into the worship of the living and true God (Hosea 2:16, cf. Deuteronomy 12:4).⁵ Worship must reflect His nature as heavenly, divine and spiritual. Humanly devised worship reflects the foolishness, carnality and vanity of humans. While reiterating the Scriptural prohibition of images, he says that it is not wrong to make an image depicting the manhood of Christ only, but that image must never be used as an instrument for use by worshipers as if it were an avenue to approach God. He wrote, "We may not bind the presence of God, the operation of His Spirit, and the hearing of us, to anything to which God has not bound Himself by any word of commandment, or promise, or both."⁶ Certainly then one cannot adore Christ in the bread of the Eucharist.

Thirdly, idolatry occurs when what belongs to God is ascribed to creatures. An example would be worship of the virgin Mary whom Papists call the queen of heaven and honor her with eight solemn feasts as well as invoking her presence in the mass, crediting her with the ability to control her Son and thus placing her above Him. Praying to her and bowing before her in worship reinforce the fact that she has been made by them into an idol.⁷ There is no divine command or promise upon which such behavior can be based.

The pope is also made into an idol because of the titles ascribed to him such as spouse of the church or because he is said to be above being judged by anyone. His word is regarded as superseding Scripture. Treating any saint this way enters into the same error. To bow before and pray to a saint is to regard him or her as having power to help in all places and times as if he or she has knowledge of the secret hearts and minds of men. Those are divine qualities.⁸

Further, the Roman view of sacraments is idolatrous when it claims that they confer grace *ex opere operato*, or that by the outward elements combined with spoken words the grace of regeneration and justification can be worked in the heart of the recipient. Perkins maintains that the work of creation belongs to the Godhead alone. God can confer grace as the sacraments are means of grace, but the elements themselves do not possess the power to automatically dispense grace.⁹

⁴ Ibid., 423.

⁵ Ibid., 424-425.

⁶ Ibid., 427-428.

⁷ Ibid., 430-433.

⁸ Ibid., 434-435.

⁹ Ibid., 436.

The hearts and affections of believers must be reserved for God and kept from idols. No part of creation can be regarded as equal to God especially with regard to our fear, obedience, love or trust.¹⁰ Civil worship which may include bowing is customary, but at no time is it appropriate to go beyond civil worship as if a person possesses more than human qualities.¹¹ If one believes that worship must happen in the presence of an image or one must kneel before an image, idolatry is present. This does not mean all images must be forbidden if they are not being misused, but all are forbidden which are meant to represent God in His nature, properties or presence. The only thing to do with an idol is destroy it lest it might awaken idolatry in an adoring heart. Perkins said, "It is a vain thing to worship God by the precepts and inventions of men" (Matthew 15:9).¹² He acknowledged reports of miracles in connection with prayers to saints but pointed out that false prophets can work miracles, and antichrist will perform lying wonders.¹³

Nothing should be called worship that God has not ordained or commanded in His Word (Deuteronomy 12:8, 32). The goal of worship is to "acknowledge, praise, and confess the infinite glory of God" which results in the worshiper's happiness and salvation (John 17:3).¹⁴ Worshipers devoid of faith and repentance are deceived if they believe they enjoy God's favor. Those who worship must worship in spirit (John 4:23-24), that is, with the mind, conscience and affections properly trained. The body is involved but is secondary, whereas Rome elevated it to primary, borrowing rites and gestures from both heathen practice and Jewish.¹⁵ Perkins will go on to teach that outward acts of worship are necessary even if of secondary importance. The body as well as the soul must learn subjection to Christ (Romans 10:10). Healthy adoration involves kneeling, prostrating and lifting one's hand or eyes. Outward worship does not please God unless preceded by inward.¹⁶

Three properties of worship are delineated. First, worship is incommunicable in that God will not share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8). As for saints, it is appropriate to honor them by reverently remembering and imitating them. They are not put in the place of God, but instead it is fitting to give God thanks for them. Second, worship must be free and voluntary and not forced (Psalm 110:3), and third, it must be joined with honesty and comeliness.¹⁷ The principal act of worship is a gracious work of God in the human heart in which He conforms the worshiper into His image in holiness and goodness, abounding in mercy (James 1:27). God then savors the duties performed as a result of such grace at work in

¹⁰ Ibid., 438.

¹¹ Ibid., 444.

¹² Ibid., 447-449, 452.

¹³ Ibid., 454.

¹⁴ Ibid., 477, 479.

¹⁵ Ibid., 480, 481.

¹⁶ Ibid., 493-495.

¹⁷ Ibid., 482-484.

the believer for in them His own goodness is magnified.¹⁸ Perkins states that true worship is eternal, beginning here and being perfected in the life to come, but ceremonies and sacraments end when this life is over. This raises the question as to whether Perkins believed that ceremonies and sacraments were not useful in the perfecting process at all or whether there is found in his perspective a hint that such things necessarily detract from true worship.

Principal worship includes both yielding and submission to Christ as well as clinging to Him. The worshiper must be conscious of the great difference between himself and God due to divine majesty. Union with God is celebrated in worship as the fountain of all goodness. Fitting subjection to His will must include a rejection of one's own reason and will. Faith, adoration and fear are essential. To fear God means to stand in awe of Him and to fear, hate and eschew offending Him. This is different from fearing punishment. Living in such reverent fear of God ushers true freedom and rest into the soul as well as humility, patience, prayer and thanksgiving.¹⁹

Perkins' treatment of the Lord's Supper denies it is a means of grace as he believed was held in the superstition of the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, he sees the right purpose of the observance as leading the participant to Christ and confirming faith while expressing thankfulness to God and spurring on to greater love for others. He saw corporate prayer as carrying greater efficacy than private and encouraged teaching in the home as a means to unpack greater benefit from public preaching.²⁰

So for Perkins, at the dawning of the Puritan era, there was a pronounced desire to separate from the Roman Catholic ways and an emphasis on developing the inner person in holiness while maintaining a purity in worship devoid of anything humans might add in addition to the commands of Scripture. Liturgical and sacramental worship would be eyed with caution and suspicion.

John Owen also produced works regarding the worship of the church. In one he addressed the Church of England's action to force worship into conformity to an imposed structure which action led to two thousand members of the clergy resigning. In 1661 a conference was called with a goal of revising the *Book of Common Prayer* according to Presbyterian convictions. It failed to achieve that goal. Instead, the "Act of Uniformity in the Prayers and Ceremonies of the Church of England" was adopted by Parliament, set to take effect on August 24, 1662. This legislation required clergy to publicly approve of all rulings of the church and state and to denounce anyone attempting to implement changes. Unless episcopally ordained, anyone administering the sacraments could be fined, imprisoned or suffer confiscation of property. It is this background which sets the stage for Owen's work "A Discourse Concerning Liturgies, and Their Imposition."

¹⁸ Ibid., 486.

¹⁹ Ibid., 487-488, 490.

²⁰ Ibid., 508-509, 511-512.

Owen considered Old Testament worship to be carnal and laden with many burdensome rites and ordinances. To complicate matters, the leaders of the Old Testament church missed the point of those rites and added their own inventions to them. Jesus rejected human inventions, saying “Every plant which my heavenly Father hath not planted shall be rooted up.” His death put an end to the institution of Mosaical worship. Since He held the office of prophet, He was able to supersede all innovations added to Jewish worship over the centuries as He dissolved the obligations instituted under Moses. It was those who were carnal and drawn to outward ceremony as central who violently opposed Paul’s freedom from the law and adherence to only the directives of Christ. Many years after the Jewish temple was destroyed and the rites belonging to it were forced to cease, carnal minds caused the Papacy to recreate the conditions of Judaism which Christ abolished, including burdensome ceremonies.²¹ Owen wrote,

When the soul of a sinner is effectually wrought upon, by the preaching of the gospel, to renounce himself and his own righteousness, and, being truly humbled for sin, to receive the Lord Christ by faith as ‘made unto him of God wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption,’ there needs, for the most part, little arguing to dissuade him from resting in or laying weight upon an outside, pompous worship; but he is immediately sensible of a delivery from its yoke, which he freely embraceth.²²

This change comes about because the Spirit that enables one to believe and receive Jesus also acquaints him with the “excellency, glory and beauty of the spiritual communion with God in Christ” which then exposes the emptiness of those pompous ceremonies which formerly brought delight to the natural man. Owen recognized that the Roman Church imposed human-devised ceremonies and named as sin any failure to adhere carefully to them.²³

Owen identified the chief acts of the church as being simply preaching the Word, administration of the sacraments, exercising discipline and saturating all with prayer and thanksgiving. He saw little room for the use of written prescriptions or formulas since God has gifted pastors and teachers to reveal the mind of Christ. Those spiritual gifts are granted directly from heaven by Christ, and any who rely on formulas fail to improve on the grace given by Christ. In fact, use of those formulas may actually indicate slothfulness or an unbelieving heart which refuses to depend on Christ to supply all that is needed, diligently seeking the Spirit.²⁴

To those who would argue that the Lord’s Prayer was given as a form by the Lord Himself, Owen responds that the reason He would give a form is that the

²¹ John Owen, “A Discourse Concerning Liturgies and Their Imposition,” *The Works of John Owen* Vol. XV (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted 2009), 3-4, 7.

²² *Ibid.*, 7-8.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-12, 28.

Holy Spirit had not yet come in the measure that would be received on Pentecost. The coming of the Holy Spirit at that event, Owen believed, would so equip the servants of Christ for ministry that there would be no further need for formulas. Thus, he combines the form of the Lord's Prayer with the Old Testament law since it was given before the ascension. But even if Christ did institute a form for worship, that does not give license for the present-day church to issue the same.²⁵

If some might object that liturgy helps ministers overcome their shortcomings regarding their gifting or that there is a benefit to uniformity in worship, Owen responds that it would be error to add to the provision the apostles had made as if it was deficient in some way. He did not believe that liturgies were employed in the apostolic era.²⁶ He does acknowledge that by the third century there was mention of collective prayers in use in some churches, but there were also ample examples of extemporaneous prayers and even a caution recorded about repeating prayers after a priest instead of engaging God freely from the heart. He believed the first three hundred years of the church were the purest standard and that the lack of recorded liturgies should set direction for the church of his own day. It is, however, important to note that Owen clarifies that he is more concerned about the forced imposition of forms of prayer than about their use by those who would engage them voluntarily.²⁷ He did not condemn the use of hymns, singing Psalms, or the use of a prayer someone may have written. Instead, what he opposed was intricate liturgies.²⁸ Form, he claimed, was not evil, but the threat of penalty for not conforming to it is.²⁹

A significant objection to Owen's position comes from observing that the magisterial reformers of the sixteenth century did not jettison liturgical form or name it as evil. Owen's answer is that the reformers were chiefly concerned with doctrine and chose not to purge the church completely of liturgy because their culture was a product of evolving Roman structure.³⁰

Two centuries later and on a different continent, the Mercersburg theologians would also face controversy regarding liturgy. In an effort to stem the tide of a runaway subjectivism which was turning public worship into a pragmatic free-for-all, Nevin labored to produce a liturgy which could reign in the wild influences surging through the culture in his day. Two important points of agreement he shared with Owen are that neither opposed the free and voluntary use of liturgy nor did either favor forceful imposition of liturgy.

²⁵ Ibid., 14-15.

²⁶ Ibid., 17, 20.

²⁷ Ibid., 21-24, 33.

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

²⁹ Ibid., 34.

³⁰ Ibid., 31.

The General Synod of the German Reformed Church met in Dayton in 1866, and it included much controversy over liturgical forms as years of study had produced "The Order of Worship for the Reformed Church in the United States," and its very existence awakened ire in some critics. Included in this work were a lectionary of the Gospels and Epistles, collects, Scriptures and prayers for families to use, etc. The Eastern Synod had devised this liturgy, but the Ohio Synod opposed liturgy for use by the congregation (but not by pastors). There was no attempt to impose the liturgy so as to violate the freedom of those who chose not to employ it. By request Nevin produced "Vindication of the Revised Liturgy, Historical and Theological," and these were the main points: the person of Jesus is the principle of Christianity; the Creed regulates faith; the Church as the body of Christ in the world is objective and historical; as a result, worship must be churchly, liturgical and sacramental.³¹

Nevin began by pointing out that liturgy has always been employed by the Reformed Church, and that it has always been considered imperfect and open to improvement. No version of it was regarded as complete, and liberty was maintained. Quite contrary to Owen's interpretation of church history, Nevin wrote that "the deeper consciousness of the Church refused to settle into contentment with the modern innovation of totally free prayer." Sadly, there had certainly been liturgies in the history of the Church which were dead forms bound together in a dead way which produced harm.³² Nevin traces the saga of exploration of the possibility of developing a uniform liturgy among the German churches in the decades leading up to the publication of the work presently under review. No effort was made to force uniformity, and if after various committees had completed their work individual congregations chose not to adopt the suggested forms, that would have been considered a fair end. Each congregation should be able to choose or reject prescribed forms freely.³³

Nevin saw the Church as a medium for Christ to communicate with His people, and liturgy can facilitate an objective working of divine grace as it rises above the arena of nature only which he associated with private, spiritualistic negotiations with God. Sacraments, he wrote, are seals of the actual realities linked to them to those who participate in them with faith. In them by the power of the Holy Spirit the visible and invisible are linked.³⁴ He characterizes his opponents who oppose even the suggestion of any liturgy as Puritanical and unchurchly because they reject the objective standards developed by the early church in its early centuries

³¹ Charles Yrigoyen Jr. and George H. Bricker, "Editorial Introduction to 'Vindication of the Revised Liturgy'" in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, Pittsburgh Original Texts & Translations Series, general editor Dikran Y. Hadidian (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 1978), 11-12.

³² John Williamson Nevin, "Vindication of the Revised Liturgy, Historical and Theological" (Philadelphia: Jas. B. Rogers, 1867), reprinted in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, edited by Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. and George H. Bricker, Pittsburgh Original Texts & Translations Series, general editor Dikran T. Hadidian (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 1978), 317-319.

³³ *Ibid.*, 335-336, 358, 360.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 380-381.

such as the Apostles' Creed, believing instead that each person must interpret the Bible for himself/herself, and because they hold that church history is of no use in developing understanding of worship.³⁵ The result of such thinking was the sectarian subjectivity evident in groups present in Nevin's day such as Anabaptists, Socinians, Quakers, Muggletonians, United Brethren, Winebrennerians, and Mormons.

Whereas Owen saw formal liturgy as opposing the idea that God had gifted leaders to preach and teach and develop their gifts, Nevin interpreted the situation differently in his context. He saw that those who rejected liturgy did so in part because they recognized in it an understanding that ordination is "the channel of supernatural official endowment for the work of the ministry."³⁶ In Nevin's eyes, that group was asserting their opinion that the church is more man-originated and man-driven, the same type of accusation Owen leveled at those who implemented liturgy in his day.

Nevin's perspective was shaped by his experience of being told in college that the churchliness of the Old School Presbyterianism of his youth was insufficient and that he should experience revival personally. So he explored that perspective for a time. It would take him years to realize that the subjectivity urged upon him which caused his spirituality to hinge on fluctuating mental states and emotions was in fact inferior to the churchly piety in which he had been reared as a child. Over time the subjective and constantly introspective brand of spirituality he was urged to adopt served to aggravate and afflict the soul, whereas the faith of his childhood nurtured him by directing his attention to the "redeeming facts and powers of Christianity" embodied in the Creed.³⁷

Nevin was clear that the German Church was not Puritan as he branded much of the culture around him to be in their rejection of gowns, altars, the church year, the use of the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed or any order prepared for worship, merely because of their attempt to flee all things Popish. But he did state that Puritanism is not to be hated or blindly opposed, for it has benefitted the church much.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid., 384.

³⁶ Ibid., 392.

³⁷ B. A. Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 53-54.

³⁸ J. W. Nevin, *History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Chambersburg: Publication of the German Reformed Church, 1817, reprinted by Bibliolife, LLC), 153, 161.

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