

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 SEVEN (cont.)

Conclusion

If one would be secluded in a remote location with the opportunity to have either Mercersburg or Puritan resources available, the better choice would be Puritan, for the content is saturated with Scripture, and the picture of salvation contains a more complete embrace of the many facets revealed by God, including His divine decrees. The cross is far more prominent, and regarding sanctification, particularly Marshall's work demonstrated the value of dying and rising with Christ. Having a fuller Biblical description of salvation does more to enter one into holy faith, holy thinking, holy willing, holy understanding, holy love, holy goodness, etc., than does a philosophical discussion. The Holy Spirit is not bound to work through philosophy but through Scripture.

But seldom is one marooned on an island. Since Christ's people live in a world filled with competing philosophies, it is helpful to engage with Nevin's use of philosophy as a step to relating the truth of Christ to the world. Charges that the Mercersburg theology is heretical would be hard to prove. A study of Philip Schaff's works indicate a strong defense of justification by faith and the authority of Scripture. Schaff and Nevin supported each other well in their time teaching together at Mercersburg. Where the Mercersburg theology is truly beneficial is how it complements Puritan theology by developing more fully the significance of the incarnation and how the church is the actual body of Christ. As other papers have demonstrated, Nevin's work on the Lord's Supper is Biblical, and in this present study has been found to agree with the Puritans whom he distrusted on the matter.

Nevin's explanation of the reconciliation of the will and the mind are helpful when reading the Puritans because it causes the many-faceted wonder of God's mysterious work to cohere as it is described in the practical insights of the Puritans. What invites very sharp criticism is that he makes central sometimes what the Bible does not, such as presenting the incarnation as overshadowing the atonement.

Watson advised that the hearer of God's Word must have a humble spirit and not sit in judgment over it. Has Nevin done that in denying supralapsarianism? It is hard to tell, because while he in principle denies what he terms abstract decrees, he also stands against Arminianism and refers favorably to predestination of some sort. If he can definitely be accused of anything, it is of creating confusion in order to preserve his philosophical base.

Without acknowledging God's decrees which cause His grace to invade the heart and mind and initiate transformation, Nevin creates a system without assurance. There can be no more comforting way to regard sanctification than to realize that God chose from eternity past to set a particular individual on a path to holiness. As Marshall has proven, assurance is crucial for sanctification, for one will only strive to lay hold of what is sure.

While Nevin referred to communion with God, the Puritans practically take the reader by the hand and lead her down the path to experience it. Nevin did not clearly promote the Gospel and conversion as the Puritans did as the means of entering holiness and union with Christ. This could be due in part to his reaction against the revivalism of his day which emphasized a point of conversion to the neglect of discipleship within the Body of Christ, just as in their day the Puritans were suspicious of form due to the empty formalism of the Roman church that was so prevalent in their own.

Nevin and Marshall share an emphasis on participation in Christ's humanity. But Marshall goes on to focus on the new identity for the one who has died and risen with Christ with greater clarity than did Nevin.

Puritanism tended to emphasize justification as the central focus of salvation, with all other aspects of soteriology springing from it. Mercersburg placed union with Christ as the central focus of salvation, and all benefits, including justification, flowed from it. Marshall preceded them in viewing union with Christ as central, but rightly highlighted a grasp of justification as an essential ingredient for healthy development of sanctification. Puritanism viewed salvation from a position where subjective faith could more easily fill the majority of their field of vision. Watson said that no other graces stir until faith sets them to work.¹ But from where Nevin and Schaff were positioned, the objective facet of salvation filled most of their field of vision, for the way Nevin would have rephrased Watson's comment is that the objective cannot be realized until it comes to fruition in the subjective.

The church is blessed to benefit from both schools. As the Mercersburg way was to marry seeming opposites and hold them in tension, so may be applied in this instance their philosophy that the completion of both is the union of both.

¹ Ibid., 200.

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