
WILLIAM GREENOUGH THAYER SHEDD
ON EVANGELICAL UNITY:
SOME PRESCRIPTIONS—THEORETICAL AND
PRACTICAL

Alan W. Gomes*

INTRODUCTION

Many rank William Greenough Thayer Shedd (1820–1894) among the most articulate and learned proponents of nineteenth-century “Old School” Presbyterianism.¹ Shedd distinguished himself as an accomplished scholar in several fields, including English literature, biblical exegesis, homiletics, and historical and systematic theology. Shedd is perhaps best known for his three volume *Dogmatic Theology*, a monumental work that was arguably the crowning achievement of his varied and eminent career.² Shedd’s theology has been appropriately

*Alan Gomes is an Associate Professor of Historical Theology and Chair of the Department of Theology at Talbot School of Theology (Biola University) in La Mirada, California. He holds a PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary.

¹For an overview of Shedd’s life and accomplishments, see John DeWitt, “William Greenough Thayer Shedd, D.D., L.L.D.,” *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* (April 1895): 295–322; Monica M. Grecu, “William G. T. Shedd,” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, American Literary Critics and Scholars, 1850–1880, vol. 64 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1988); Edward E. Hindson, introduction to *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 vols., by William G. T. Shedd (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980); Bernard Vernon Munger, “William Greenough Thayer Shedd: Reformed Traditionalist, 1820–1894” (PhD diss., Duke University, 1957); Mark A. Trechock, “Orthodoxy for a Critical Period: Five Case Studies in American Protestant Theology Circa 1870” (ThD diss., Iliff School of Theology, 1987); and Cyril J. Barber, foreword to *Theological Essays and Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*, by William G. T. Shedd (1877; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1981).

²I am pleased to say that I am just now completing a revised edition of Shedd’s *Dogmatic Theology*, to be published by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers. This edition will contain the complete three volume text of Shedd with several helpful improvements for students, including an English translation of all foreign language citations (principally Latin, Greek, Hebrew, German and French); an overview of the system, describing its contours in some detail; and a

described by others, including his contemporaries, as "high Calvinism,"³ and by himself, on certain points at least, as "the elder Calvinism."⁴ Shedd wrote at a time when this "high Calvinism" was being eroded by latitudinarian tendencies from within the camp, and by what Shedd saw as virulent strains of infidelity from without. Examples of the former were a greater acceptance of higher critical scholarship—evidenced most poignantly by the controversial inaugural address of Charles Augustus Briggs at his own Union seminary⁵—and by a movement within the Northern Presbyterian Church to soften the Westminster standards in a latitudinarian and even in an Arminianizing direction.⁶ External threats included the growing acceptance of Darwinism and the philosophical materialism cognate to it.

Shedd's staunch and outspoken opposition to these and other such doctrinal deviations is well known even to casual students of the period. Shedd is numbered among the stalwarts who inveighed against the liberalizing forces of his day. Depending on the interpreter, he is portrayed either as a reactionary—hopelessly out of step and mired in the fossilized theology of a bygone age⁷—or as a champion of evangelical purity and scriptural fidelity in a time of doctrinal, spiritual and moral decay.⁸

What is not so often noted, and what may well run contrary to expectation, is a strong and sometimes surprising "ecumenical" refrain within Shedd's writings. Though an unabashed exponent of strict Calvinism, he was careful to delineate areas of agreement with Arminianism and provided argumentation for why he considered the Arminian position to be in the genus of evangelicalism, even if not the

glossary of technical terms and historical references appearing throughout the system. Also, the material from the third, supplemental volume will be more conveniently referenced and folded into the body of the system.

³Trechock, "Orthodoxy," 41; DeWitt, "Shedd," 310.

⁴W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1889), v. He described himself as in agreement with the "elder Calvinism" on certain points, though in agreement with the later Calvinism in many others.

⁵Briggs' inaugural address and the subsequent ecclesiastical trial is discussed in Trechock, "Orthodoxy," 27; Munger, "Shedd: Reformed Traditionalist," 31, 210; and DeWitt, "Shedd," 321.

⁶This is discussed in DeWitt, "Shedd," 321. Shedd wrote against such a revision in his *Calvinism: Pure and Mixed* (1893; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986); *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy* (New York: Scribner, 1873); and *The Proposed Revision of the Westminster Standards* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1890).

⁷E.g., Munger.

⁸This is the opinion of many evangelicals, older as well as more recent. Of course, Shedd's colleague DeWitt wrote from just such a favorable vantage point.

species most to his liking. Shedd, as we shall see, sometimes spoke warmly of certain Arminian divines as to their evident piety and was outspoken about what he perceived to be the fundamental evangelical soundness of the Arminian system.

Shedd's ecumenical impulse went well beyond an appreciation for Arminianism. His approbation of evangelical Arminianism is consubstantial, as it were, with his high historical sense. Shedd had a keen awareness of historical continuity with the great theologians of the past, including the early church fathers (especially Athanasius and Augustine) and the medievals (most notably Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, and, with reference to the doctrine of original sin, Odo of Tournai). Though he critically noted aberrations where he observed them,⁹ Shedd also felt that the great themes of the Bible—the Creation, the apostasy and the redemption from it—are not the exclusive possession of one group or sect but belong to all Christians in every age. While he believed that the Augustinian/Calvinistic theology articulated these doctrines best, he certainly did not deny their existence outside of this expression, even where the approach taken to these doctrines was, in his opinion, less than ideal.

Though much could be said about Shedd's profound appreciation for the Christian tradition generally, the focus of the present essay concerns his attitude toward fellow evangelicals outside of his own Calvinistic orbit, most particularly his program for salutary "ecumenical" relationships with evangelical Arminians.

To get at Shedd's views on evangelical cooperation, we shall consider three main issues in Shedd's thought. First, we shall look at what Shedd regarded as the doctrinal *sine qua non* for a *theological system* to be fundamentally orthodox generally and then evangelical specifically. What beliefs are necessary for a denomination to be "evangelical"? And by Shedd's criteria what main divisions and subgroupings do we find within evangelicalism? Second, how are we to account for these subdivisions within the evangelical pale? Granting that all evangelicals hold to the final authority of Scripture, why do not all evangelicals see eye to eye in their theological systems and confessional expressions? Third, we shall examine Shedd's view on the sort of cooperation and unity that is desirable between the various evangelical groups. Given the

⁹"No more powerful reasoning against atheism and materialism, no stronger defence of the principles of ethics and natural religion, can be found than that of the 'angelic' doctor. And in respect to the doctrines of revealed religion, the enunciation and support which they have obtained in the *Summa Theologica*, make this treatise one of the bulwarks of the faith. What is distinctively Papal and Roman will not, of course, command the judgment of the Protestant; but this constitutes only a fraction of the sum total" (*Obstacles and Rewards of Orthodoxy* [New York: A. D. F. Randolph, 1879], 14).

manifest doctrinal differences between sundry evangelical denominations, is unity possible or even desirable? What should be its limits? What shape should it take? And how can it be achieved?

SHEDD ON THE BOUNDARIES OF EVANGELICALISM

Shedd and Orthodoxy

Shedd was explicit in delineating certain constitutive credenda for orthodoxy, which he believed form the *sine qua non* of Christian belief. According to Shedd, these are the affirmations that must be present if a system is to be denominated "Christian" in any meaningful sense. These truths, the acceptance of which are "necessary in order to be a Christian in the sense in which the first disciples were so called at Antioch," include: "the doctrines of the Trinity and incarnation, [and] of apostasy and redemption, as they are generally and largely enunciated in the Apostles' and Nicene creeds." These are the truths that have been held in common by Christians in all ages. Shedd stated bluntly that "schemes that deny the Trinity and incarnation, the apostasy and redemption" simply are "not Christian."¹⁰ Consequently, such doctrines constitute the core of Christian orthodoxy.

At the same time, Shedd recognized that "the Christian religion also contains certain other truths which, both in the Scriptures and in the doctrinal systems constructed out of them, are implications and deductions from these cardinal doctrines." Orthodoxy, in its historical outworking, has taken shape in two main types or doctrinal patterns. In the early and medieval church the two main approaches were either semi-Pelagianism or Augustinianism. Since the Reformation, the modern counterparts to these are Arminianism and Calvinism, respectively. Here the focus is on the explication of certain doctrines in the system, specifically "the more exact definition of original sin, of human freedom and ability, and of the Divine sovereignty and decrees." Concerning these two basic types Shedd concluded, "So long as Christian believers see through a glass darkly, there will be a speculative difference between them on these abstruser parts of revelation...."¹¹

Shedd and "Evangelicalism"

Shedd's definition of orthodoxy seems clear enough. However, when Shedd introduces the adjective "evangelical" in reference to theological systems and certain Christian bodies, the waters become considerably muddied.

¹⁰ *Calvinism: Pure and Mixed*, 148-49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

In some instances he seemed to use the word as a synonym for "orthodox," and would therefore appear to include, *ipso facto*, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox within the pale. For example, in the quote alluded to earlier, Shedd stated:

...evangelical Christendom has *from the first* been divided into two great divisions. In respect to them, the *ancient theologian* was either Augustinian or Semi-Pelagian; the modern theologian is either Calvinistic or Arminian.¹²

Granting that these "two great divisions" divided "evangelical Christendom...from the first," it would appear that Shedd used the term "evangelical" as synonymous with "orthodox," extending the label to "ancient" as well as to "modern" theologians and theologies. In another place he described Calvinism, Lutheranism, Arminianism and Wesleyanism as "evangelical" because they "contain the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, the apostasy, and redemption."¹³ Though he cited only Protestant examples, his criteria would apply to conservative non-Protestants, viz. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, as well.

In other passages, however, Shedd seemed to limit the term "evangelical" to Protestants, and even more specifically to Calvinists and Arminians. Accordingly, he spoke of Calvinism and Arminianism as "*the two great systems of theology which divide evangelical Christendom.*"¹⁴ He further claimed that "Evangelical Christendom is composed of Christians whose creed is *either that of Calvin or that of Arminius*. Those persons who cannot adopt the fundamental views of one or the other of these theological leaders, must be counted out."¹⁵ Yet, sometimes the criteria used to support this judgment is sufficiently porous to include not only non-Calvinist and non-Arminian Protestants, such as Lutherans, but would include even non-Protestant Christians, as noted in the preceding paragraph. For instance, in one place he seemed to put the distinctively Protestant doctrine of *sola fide* as determinative.¹⁶ This criterion certainly excludes all non-Protestants (not to mention heterodox sects such as the Socinians), but it would also *include* orthodox Lutherans, who affirm the doctrine of *sola fide* but who are neither Calvinist nor Arminian.¹⁷ And in the quote cited above, the argument given for "counting out" of the evangelical roll call non-

¹²*Ibid.*, 149 (emphasis added).

¹³*Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴*Dogmatic Theology*, 1:448.

¹⁵*Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*, "Denominational Unity Undesirable," 247 (italics added).

¹⁶Both [Calvinists and Arminians] are *evangelical*, in affirming that salvation is solely by faith in Christ's atoning blood" (*Dogmatic Theology*, 2:471).

¹⁷Shedd specifically refers to the "Later-Lutherans" as "evangelical" in *Calvinism: Pure and Mixed*, 13.

Arminians and non-Calvinists is that the excluded groups “reject the doctrine of Christ’s divinity and of forgiveness through his atonement—doctrines common to all Trinitarians.” Surely this would come as a surprise to Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox believers, who affirm these doctrines but who can hardly be described as followers of Arminius or of Calvin.

Certainly, then, Shedd was unclear and inconsistent in his use of the term “evangelical.” Yet, in spite of his imprecision I do believe it is possible to get an overall sense of how he intended the term to be used. Taking Shedd’s writings as a whole, it appears that Shedd reserved the word specifically for conservative Protestant denominations and systems of theology, including Calvinism, Arminianism and Lutheranism. It is significant that whenever Shedd applied the adjective “evangelical” to an identifiable denominational body or an explicitly identified theological system it was always a conservative Protestant body or system.

Arminianism as “Evangelical”

Whatever else one may say about Shedd’s use of the term “evangelical,” it is beyond dispute that he regarded Arminianism to be a genuine expression of evangelicalism. One of the main reasons he did so was because he regarded Arminians and Calvinists as in “substantial agreement” on their soteriology, particularly on the nature and necessity of Christ’s vicarious atonement—a doctrine of central importance for Shedd.¹⁸ Shedd went so far as to say that “the two harmonize here [on the nature and necessity of the atonement], and could, probably, draw up a common creed.”¹⁹ In proof of this perceived agreement, Shedd zeroed in on the issue of the infinite value of Christ’s sacrifice, a view he claimed Arminians and Calvinists shared.²⁰ This, apparently, would stand in

¹⁸Shedd’s interest in vicarious atonement is evident from the great attention he paid to it in his *Dogmatic Theology* (his 122-page chapter is a virtual monograph), as well as his admission that the “Anselmic soteriology” forms one of the three “centers” from which he wrote his history of doctrine (preface, viii). Nor is his treatment of this topic limited to these two works (e.g., see his *Theological Essays* as well as his *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*). This interest is also shown in his discussion of doctrines cognate to it, including divine justice and the doctrine of eternal punishment—doctrines that he brings into direct connection with his consideration of atonement proper.

¹⁹*Obstacles and Rewards of Orthodoxy*, 17.

²⁰“The Scriptures represent the sufferings and death of the Son of God as taking the place of the suffering and death due to the sinner for his sin, and in this way delivering him from his desert. But the sufferings of Christ, it is agreed by all Trinitarians, from high Calvinists to low Arminians, are *infinite* in their dignity and value. They are the agony, not of a creature, but of incarnate God. All who are properly denominated ‘evangelical,’ though they may disagree upon many other points of doctrine, scout the notion that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ

contrast to the position of Duns Scotus, Hugo Grotius and, in principle, that of Faustus Socinus, which he denominated an "acceptilation" theory. Shedd described acceptilation theories as affirming that God, "by a volitional decision [determines to] accept a substituted penalty of inferior value."²¹ He did acknowledge, however, a manifest difference between Calvinism and Arminianism when one considers the *application* of the atonement, specifically the source of faith by which that atonement is applied.²²

Some observations should be made about the accuracy of Shedd's perception on this score. First, while Shedd was certainly correct in pinpointing a difference between the Arminian and Calvinist systems on the issue of the atonement's application, his claim that they are compatible on the question of its nature and necessity is simply incorrect. It was the Remonstrants²³ and not the Socinians who held that God

was merely finite, and that his blood possesses no higher expiating virtue than that of a creature. And in this they are supported by the Scriptures" (*Orthodoxy & Heterodoxy*, "Endless Punishment an Essential Doctrine of Christianity," 183–84).

²¹*Dogmatic Theology* 2:453. Note that Shedd incorrectly applied the label "acceptilation" when he should have referred to it as "acceptation." In an "acceptilation" no payment is received and the debt is declared paid, whereas in an "acceptation" the creditor accepts some payment, but one of lesser value, and on that basis absolves the debt.

²²*Ibid.* Likewise, in *Dogmatic Theology* 2:471–72 he stated, "The difference between the Calvinist and the Arminian appears at this point. Both are *evangelical*, in affirming that salvation is solely by faith in Christ's atoning blood. This differentiates them from the legal Socinian, who denies the doctrine of vicarious atonement, and founds salvation from condemnation on personal character and good works. But they differ regarding the *origin of faith*. The Calvinist maintains that faith is *wholly* from God, being one of the effects of regeneration; the Arminian, that it is *partly* from God and partly from man. The Calvinist asserts that a sinner is *unconditionally* elected to the act of faith, and that the Holy Spirit in regeneration inclines and enables him to the act, without co-operation and assistance from him. The Arminian asserts that a sinner is *conditionally* elected to the act of faith, and that the Holy Spirit works faith in him with some assistance and co-operation from him. This co-operation consists in ceasing to resist, and yielding to the operation of the Spirit. In this case, the Holy Spirit does not overcome a totally averse and resisting will, which is the Calvinistic view, but he influences a partially inclining will."

²³By the term "Remonstrant" I am referring specifically to the scholastic Arminianism of (primarily) the seventeenth century. This term is more specific than "Arminian," which is sometimes used as a synonym for "Remonstrant" but which is also applied in a broader sense to other synergistic Protestant systems that do not stand in a direct historical line with Arminius and his followers, e.g., Wesleyanism. As for Shedd's own usage, sometimes he used the term "Arminianism" in the broad sense of the word, whereas in other places he spoke

accepts Christ's death *as if* it were equivalent to ours. God does so based on the divine decree, not based on an intrinsically infinite value inhering in the death itself—a value which accrues from his infinite dignity as the God-man. In scholastic Arminianism, Christ's death is simply a sacrifice, on the basis of which God freely decrees to hang forgiveness, and this quite apart from any notion of it functioning as a *quid pro quo*. In the Arminian theory one immediately recognizes a reprobation of the acceptance theory of Duns Scotus.²⁴

Second, the Socinian theory, which Shedd regarded as heterodox and therefore unevangelical, explicitly rejected the Scotistic/Arminian

of "Arminianism and Wesleyanism," thereby distinguishing them. To avoid misunderstanding, I have deliberately used the word "Remonstrant" in this discussion about the scholastic Arminian view of the atonement, realizing that it may not reflect the Wesleyan position at certain points.

²⁴The Remonstrant position on the necessity of Christ's death is in many ways a throwback to the Scotist doctrine. Like Scotus, the Arminians affirm God's *potentia absoluta*, on the basis of which he may punish or not as he sees fit. Episcopus (*Opera Theologica* [Amsterdam: 1650–65] 64.5.3, p. 407) is representative when he argues, "God could, if he would, through his absolute right and supreme power, being, as he is, a lord, under obligations and oath to no one, have forgiven the human race all its sins..." ("*Potuisset utique Deus, si voluisset, pro absoluto jure & suprema potestate sua, tanquam nulli obligatus, nulli juratus dominus, peccata omnia humano generi condonare...*"). Indeed, to state that God is constrained to punish sin is inconsistent "with the supreme lordship of God" ("*Alioquin justitia divina non posset consistere cum supremo domino Dei...*"). This is hardly the same as the Reformed position on the necessity of Christ's death. One finds the same sentiment in Curcellaeus (*Opera Theologica* [Amsterdam, 1675], 300) and again in Episcopus. See also Limborch (*Theologia Christiana* [Amsterdam, 1695] 3.18.4).

In addition to the divergence with the Reformed position on the *necessity* of satisfaction, there is also a difference as to its *nature*. The Arminians move away from regarding Christ's work as a satisfaction at all. In their rejection of satisfaction they follow the criticisms of Socinus with little modification. However, they do not adopt the positive theory of Socinus. Rather, they increasingly speak of Christ's work as a *sacrifice* rather than a satisfaction. They argue that Christ's sacrifice does not satisfy strict justice, but is simply the condition on which God has freely chosen to hang forgiveness. Here the similarity with the Scotistic *acceptatio* is apparent. But unlike Scotus and in agreement with Aquinas, the Arminians typically advance the fittingness of Christ's passion. Thus, Limborch (3.18.5, p. 245) states, "God in accordance with his supreme wisdom chose this way of bringing men to salvation as the fittest (*tamquam convenientissimam*), as the most suited (*maxime accommodatum*) to the illustration of his glory, and the conversion of men from their sins to a zeal for holiness." [The foregoing was summarized from my PhD Dissertation, *De Jesu Christo Servatore: Historical Introduction, Translation, and Critical Notes* (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1990), 310–11.]

position on this particular issue.²⁵ No doubt Shedd was correct in denying evangelical status to the Socinian view, but one of his main reasons for doing so actually cut against the Remonstrants and not the Socinians. Consequently, it is interesting that what Shedd regarded to be a key underpinning of the Socinian theory was actually held by the Remonstrants, whom Shedd considered evangelical in this most important of all doctrines.

Finally, and what is most surprising of all, one can find passages where Shedd himself accurately described the Remonstrant position as a species of acceptance theory.²⁶ Even in the quote already cited, he mentioned Grotius as affirming acceptance, and Grotius was certainly an Arminian by any reckoning. Furthermore, in his extended treatment of Remonstrant soteriology in his history of doctrine, Shedd stated, "A substituted penalty is a strict equivalent, but a substitute *for* a penalty[as in Arminianism], may be of inferior worth, as when a partial satisfaction is accepted for a plenary one, by the method of acceptation [sic]...."²⁷

It is not immediately evident how one is to account for this overly gracious treatment of classic Arminianism on a doctrine he considered an evangelical litmus test. Regardless, Shedd clearly regarded Arminians to be evangelical allies against the forces of heterodoxy and considered them to be in fundamental agreement with Calvinism on this critical doctrine.

THE REASON FOR DOCTRINAL DIVISIONS WITHIN EVANGELICALISM

As Shedd's close friend and colleague Prof. John DeWitt pointed out, Shedd was careful to distinguish the sphere of "scientific theology" from

²⁵Faustus Socinus, *De Jesu Christo Servatore* 3.3.251-52. While Socinus does show strong affinities with Duns Scotus in terms of his negative critique against the doctrine of satisfaction, he does not agree with Duns in adopting an acceptance theory of the atonement. For Socinus, Christ is our Savior in the sense that he has made known the way of salvation, which we attain by imitating him (*De Servatore* 1.1.2).

²⁶As noted earlier, Shedd applies the term "acceptation," though the position in question is "acceptation."

²⁷W. G. T. Shedd, *History of Doctrine* (New York: Scribner' Sons, 1889), 2:373. As noted in footnote 23, the preceding discussion on Arminian soteriology has scholastic Remonstrants and not Wesleyan "Arminians" in view. The preceding critique may not apply to the Wesleyan perspective, which Shedd also in some places labeled under the generic category of "Arminian." Regardless, the point at issue still stands; Shedd certainly did not exclude the Remonstrant theology from his consideration when he spoke approvingly of the evangelical nature of Arminianism.

that of "experimental religion."²⁸ DeWitt cited a telling passage from Shedd's *History of Doctrine* in which Shedd stated, "Tried by the test of exact dogmatic statements, there is a plain difference between the symbol of the Arminian and that of the Calvinist; but *tried by the test of practical piety and devout feeling*, there is but little difference between the character of John Wesley and John Calvin."²⁹ Shedd accounted for this distinction by observing that "the practical religious life is much more directly a product of the Holy Spirit than is the speculative construction of Scripture truth." In regeneration the Spirit works directly on the soul, and hence there is an immediate and definite renovation that is evident in all who are so transformed. The characteristics of this renovation show similar marks from person to person, since in each case the Holy Spirit is the direct author of it. In constructing a theological system, the situation is different; "the creed is not so certainly formed under a divine illumination."³⁰ Stated simply, regeneration is an immediate work of the Spirit whereas the development of a theological system entails "the sphere of the human understanding and of human science," with a corresponding diversity in the resultant acuity of theological construction.

Again using the comparison between Calvin and Wesley, Shedd provided a very interesting analysis, which bears quoting in full:

"THERE are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all," said St. Paul to the Corinthian church, and to the church universal. By this he teaches, among other things, that all Christian ministers ought to hold the same fundamental truth, though they may preach it in different modes and manners. The same Holy Ghost employs the same doctrines of law and gospel, exerts the same divine influence, and produces the same personal experience, when he makes a Christian of John Calvin as when he makes a Christian of John Wesley. But, the treasure is in an earthen vessel, and there is a difference in the way in which it comes out of the vessel. Two equally good men may not be equally successful in describing their own religious experience to others. *But the description of the religious experience is substantially a statement of religious doctrine.* If the one man is able to state it with great fulness and self-consistence while the other reports it with less fulness and logical consistency, it is plain that to a mere student of theological systems the two men will so differ as perhaps to lead to the conclusion that they do not believe the same fundamental truth, and do not have a common religious experience. But this is an error. He who searches the heart perceives that the two men agree in their view of their own sinfulness and of Christ's redemption. They hold the same gospel truth, and therefore they are brethren in the Lord. Their religious experience, which is what God has wrought in them, is the same evangelical

²⁸DeWitt, "Shedd," 318.

²⁹Ibid., citing Shedd, *History of Doctrine*, 2:424-25 (italics added by DeWitt).

³⁰*History of Doctrine*, 2:425.

experience that belongs to all members of the one invisible church of Christ.³¹

It appears, then, that in Shedd's view all evangelicals do in fact hold to one and the same doctrine on an experiential level, even though the various statements of that doctrine may seem quite at odds with one another.

Does this mean that there is no connection whatever between a common religious experience and its outward expression? Shedd would not go so far as to suggest that. Shedd seemed to believe that the common experience will reflect *at least some* commonality in terms of outward expression as well. For example, Shedd said that even though "evangelical Arminians" reject Calvinism in their creeds they actually *experience* Calvinism to a significant degree in their piety, and accordingly we see Arminians expressing the truths of Calvinism by "praying it [Calvinism] in their prayers and singing it in their hymns."³² Shedd also believed that the Arminian "really adopts" the Calvinistic (and therefore scriptural) doctrine of unconditional election and total inability "when he sings with Charles Wesley: 'Other refuge have I none, *Hangs* my helpless soul on thee.'"³³

At this point it is fair to ask, "Just how much diversity—one might say deviance—from an evangelical *expression* of the faith can there be in one whose *experience* of regeneration is truly evangelical?" Though Shedd did not attempt to quantify this, he cautioned that a person may actually embrace orthodox doctrines in an "implicit" and "latent" way, even though the expression of that doctrine may be quite indistinct, confused and unclear.³⁴ Here Shedd did not have in mind so much the propositions of Arminianism, which as a doctrinal system is as clear and explicit as Calvinism. Rather, Shedd had in view those who have experienced true regeneration but who possess a very muddled or perhaps only inchoate systematic theology. Shedd, citing Witsius, tells us that while "the command of God indeed lays an indispensable obligation upon all men to make every possible effort to attain a most clear, distinct, and assured knowledge of divine truth," it is also true that "the Deity, in his unbounded goodness, receives many to the abodes of bliss whose knowledge even of the principal articles is very indistinct, and such as they are hardly capable of expressing in their own words." Shedd concluded that, at the very least, "the smallest measure of the requisite knowledge" is that a person must "embrace [a doctrine] as true"

³¹*Orthodoxy & Heterodoxy*, "One Truth for All Pulpits," 43-44 (italics added).

³²*Calvinism: Pure and Mixed*, 150.

³³*Dogmatic Theology*, 2:472 (italics in the original).

³⁴*Dogmatic Theology*, 2:706-7, n1.

once the doctrine is explained and apprehended to whatever degree possible.³⁵

From the foregoing discussion on religious experience and its doctrinal expression, it seems that Shedd lodged the principium of creedal differences in the speculative faculty, viz. the understanding—exclusively, it would seem—and does not factor in the will. This appears to put him somewhat at odds with others of the conservative Protestant and even Catholic traditions. This divergence with the tradition becomes clear when we see what Shedd had to say about the denunciations of errant *teachers* one finds in the writings of Reformation-era theologians such as Luther and even the mild-mannered Melancthon. Shedd opined, "It is an error to assume that in these instances, the energy of the epithets is aimed at the persons. It is aimed at their opinions."³⁶ He regarded this as analogous to the damnatory clauses of the Nicene Creed, which he claimed do not "undertake to decide the state of the heart, and actually pronounce, in anticipation, the final judgment of God respecting a particular individual; because the latitudinarian person may be better than his creed, and the orthodox person may be worse than his." He said that the point of the damnatory clauses is only to condemn "a tenet or a doctrine," and then concluded, somewhat contradictorily, that a denial of the orthodox doctrines in question represent "a fatal error"—presumably "fatal" in the sense that they would bar one holding such a doctrine from "the abodes of bliss."

Even if Shedd himself could maintain such a disjunction between "projects and their advocates,"³⁷ he was certainly incorrect in reading that distinction back into the historical record and as seeing himself in harmony with it. Other theologians, including those of his tradition, believed that false doctrine flows not merely from the understanding but also from the *will*, and accordingly excoriated not only false beliefs but also their purveyors. The damnatory clauses of the Nicene Creed, for example, condemn "*those who say, 'there was once when he was not.'*" Such expressions are readily produced from Protestant sources as well. Certainly Luther raised such modes of speech to an art form, damning Pope (i.e., "his Hellishness") and fellow Protestant (e.g., Zwingli) alike for their views. The point here is not to vindicate or condemn Shedd's more "charitable" approach in such matters, but simply to note Shedd's own divergence from the tradition, regardless of his own sense of continuity with it.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Obstacles and Rewards of Orthodoxy*, 10.

³⁷ *Calvinism: Pure & Mixed*, ix-x.

EVANGELICAL UNITY

Granting Shedd's premise that Calvinism and Arminianism share a common "evangelical substratum,"³⁸ the question naturally arises as to whether the cause of Christ might best be served by translating that spiritual unity into an outward, visible unity. Might it not be best to unite under a single denominational umbrella rather than maintaining separate organizations with separate confessions? Shedd himself raised the question as to whether it might not "speed the progress of the gospel through this sinful world, to bring Arminians and Calvinists together in a single denomination."³⁹ The formation of such an entity would, it seems, require a softening or diversifying of the strict confessional standards to allow for what might be called a "Calminian" approach. If the confessions were modified to be more flexible and to allow a greater diversity of opinion, then genuine evangelicals—who might differ on such doctrines as predestination, the *ordo salutis* and the nature of salvific grace—could coexist within the same church body. This softening of the confessions is, in fact, precisely what Arminius himself sought in reference to the *Belgic Confession* and *Heidelberg Catechism*.⁴⁰

However seductive the appeal of breaking down denominational barriers might seem at first glance, Shedd regarded such a course to be untenable and undesirable. Shedd stated, "So long as Christian believers see through a glass darkly, there will be a speculative difference between them on these abstruser parts of revelation that will affect more or less the style of the religious experience, and make separate religious organizations desirable."⁴¹ Shedd came to this conclusion both as a matter of principle and for pragmatic reasons, as we shall see.

At the same time, Shedd did not believe that the maintenance of separate organizations harms the cause of the gospel *per se*. He believed that there are many opportunities for evangelical cooperation even with—indeed, especially with—separate denominational structures. That is, he believed that maintaining separate denominations actually enhanced the opportunities for accomplishing common goals.

Maintaining Separate Denominations as a Matter of Principle

Shedd believed that there are genuine, irreconcilable differences between Calvinism and Arminianism sufficiently important not to be glossed over. Shedd cited, for example, "the question whether, in respect to the

³⁸*Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*, "Denominational Unity Undesirable," 249.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 248.

⁴⁰See, e.g., Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacobus Arminius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 41–42.

⁴¹*Calvinism: Pure and Mixed*, 149.

act of faith, the divine agency precedes or succeeds the human." Similarly, "the doctrine of election, as the Calvinist holds it, and as the Arminian holds it, can not both be formulated in one proposition."⁴² The nature of the disagreement on these and certain other truths is so "clear and decided" that the only way there can be doctrinal unity on these points is by "transubstantiation," namely, the Calvinist becoming an Arminian or vice versa.⁴³ Such "transubstantiation" is unrealistic, at least on any global scale, given that:

This difference has for fifteen centuries crystallized into two sharply-edged types of theology, and there are no signs that one will outreason and conquer the other. Calvinism and Calvinistic denominations will probably continue to exist to the end of time; and so will Arminianism and Arminian denominations.⁴⁴

This being the case, "the true course is for the Arminian to hold his ground, and defend his opinion with all the logic and all the earnestness of which he is master; and for the Calvinist to do the same thing."⁴⁵

Consequently, Shedd believed that denominations must maintain true to their confessions as a matter of honesty and integrity, in order to be true to themselves. Those who find themselves in disagreement with a denomination's confessional stance ought to be honest enough to admit the incompatibility and seek a denominational home compatible with their own views, rather than attempting to subvert the doctrine of a denomination by mixing in foreign elements. As a convinced Calvinist, Shedd believed that "Arminianism, pure and simple, frank and manly, is far preferable to Calvinism modified by Arminian elements." Similarly, if a denomination is committed to Arminianism, then Arminian it should be, rather than creating a hybrid of Arminianism "dashed with the bitter bowls of decrees and predestination." Those who take such a "frank and manly" posture are to that degree honest and open, and invite the respect of those with whom they disagree. When an attempt is made to "mix the immiscible," the result of such equivocation is unhealthy "intrigue," causing "insincerity and hypocrisy" inevitably to creep in. Under such conditions "one party strives to outwit the other and the result is a quarrelsome married life, ending in a divorce."⁴⁶

Shedd himself faced this battle in the attempts of some within the Northern Presbyterian Church to introduce non-Calvinistic, even non-evangelical, elements into the denomination—such as those espoused by Briggs in his inaugural address. Shedd declared that this attempt

⁴²*Obstacles and Rewards of Orthodoxy*, 17.

⁴³*Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*, "Denominational Unity Undesirable," 249.

⁴⁴*Calvinism: Pure and Mixed*, 149.

⁴⁵*Obstacles and Rewards of Orthodoxy*, 17.

⁴⁶*Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*, "Denominational Unity Undesirable," 249.

"strongly illustrates the divisive nature of a dual theology in a single denomination."⁴⁷ Shedd believed that the inculcation of such views in the theological seminaries of his denomination would prove "suicidal" and a division into two denominations would become inevitable. Given the choice between such duplicity and outright but "honest heresy," Shedd would actually choose heresy. "Heresy is a sin,...but heresy is not so great a sin as dishonesty. There may be honest heresy, but not honest dishonesty."⁴⁸

Pragmatic Reasons for Maintaining Separate Denominational Structures

Besides the ethical issue of honesty versus duplicity, Shedd also argued that merging disparate theologies into a single denomination simply could not work from a pragmatic standpoint.

One of the strongest reasons for maintaining separate structures, according to Shedd, is the difficulty of training and licensing clergy in a theologically hybrid denomination. Shedd asked,

But supposing a union of Calvinists and Arminians, what shall be the system of doctrine taught in its theological schools? Who shall be appointed to deliver lectures in divinity to the classes? If Arminianism were selected, it would be impossible for conscientious and earnest Calvinists to acquiesce in this arrangement. If Calvinism were selected, it would be equally impossible for conscientious and earnest Arminians to be satisfied. There would be conflict in the new denomination immediately regarding that one subject, the training of ministers, which more than any other is fitted to agitate a religious organization to the inmost.⁴⁹

Nor would the problems end once the minister received his training. Consider the difficulty of ordaining a candidate in a denomination roughly split between Calvinists and Arminians. "The answers satisfactory to one division must be unsatisfactory to the other; and the young minister could not go forth with the cordial approbation and support of the entire body."⁵⁰

The attempt to force people holding such incompatible theologies to live under one ecclesiastical roof would lead inevitably to frictions, rivalry and the attempt of one party to triumph over the other. Shedd believed that the English Episcopal Church, which included Calvinists and Arminians in one body, illustrated this point. According to him, Calvinists and Arminians within this body "never have had, and never will have, the same good understanding and mutual respect and

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 252-53.

⁴⁸*Calvinism: Pure and Mixed*, 152.

⁴⁹*Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*, "Denominational Unity Undesirable," 248-49.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 250.

confidence that prevails between the Methodist and the Presbyterian churches in this country."⁵¹

Shedd's Prescription for Unity

Shedd took quite seriously the genuine spiritual bond that exists between all evangelicals. This union, "which is grounded in a common trust in the Divine Redeemer and his atoning blood," is not merely hypothetical or a vague wish; it is "both possible and actual."⁵² But just how "actual" can this unity be in practical life, given Shedd's strong emphasis on denominations maintaining their exclusivistic confessional integrity? Did not Shedd's staunch unwillingness to "mix the immiscible," to graciously allow Arminian elements into the Presbyterian Church, belie his claims of a genuine spiritual bond between Calvinists and Arminians? If denominations do not allow within their bosoms the kind of diversity that exists between true evangelicals, are they not failing to instantiate the unity and diversity in the body that Shedd declared is not only possible but actual?

Shedd argued that quite the opposite is the case. He believed that Calvinists and Arminians can actually realize greater spiritual unity and be more effective in achieving common goals when they maintain their own separate denominational structures, hold to their confessional positions in all their integrity and recognize frankly such irreconcilable differences as do exist. According to Shedd, "There is a better understanding, and a more fraternal feeling, between churches that are bold and outspoken in the assertion of their distinctive peculiarities, than between those who recede from their peculiarities in the hope of an organic union between the two." The fraternal collegiality is enhanced because neither advocate has anything to hide from the other; there is no intrigue or attempt to subvert a common denomination into one position or the other. Each side knows precisely where the other stands; "the flags and pennons of both are streaming in the wind." Under these circumstances each side can accept the other for who they are, and can "co-operate, perhaps with even greater efficiency, against the enemies of their common faith."⁵³

Shedd illustrated the unity that can exist between distinct, separate ecclesiastical entities with some picturesque analogies. In one passage he compared Calvinist and Arminian denominations to two families living under different households:

Two families, each living in its own house, have more affection and less friction than two families living under one roof. And the reason is, that, by

⁵¹ *Obstacles and Rewards of Orthodoxy*, 16-17.

⁵² *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*, "Denominational Unity Undesirable," 250.

⁵³ *Obstacles and Rewards of Orthodoxy*, 16-18.

this arrangement, the peculiarities and preferences of one family do not clash with those of the other. Each sees the good qualities of the other, while the disagreeable traits of each are not observed. And this would be equally true if the supposed families were blood relations. So is it with the different branches of Christ's household.⁵⁴

In another place he likened Calvinist and Arminian denominations to "neighboring nations that respect each other's national peculiarities and each other's rights." Such nations maintain their sovereignty and run their own internal affairs, but at the same time "combine their forces, and move forward against a common foe, whenever he appears."⁵⁵

What, then, are some ways that this cooperation occurs in practical life? Shedd spelled out some specific instances where cooperation between Calvinist and Arminian denominations is both desirable and attainable. Some venues for real fraternal cooperation include corporate prayer, missionary activities and charitable work. In activities such as these, "the brotherhood at large, in all the evangelical churches, can and do mingle with each other in fraternal love and confidence."⁵⁶

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I believe that Shedd's insights, as discussed in this paper, apply directly to some of the issues facing contemporary evangelicalism. While Calvinists and Arminians ought not to water down or minimize the real differences that do exist between them, they also ought to see themselves as cobelligerents in a larger struggle against the common enemies of the historic, orthodox faith. In that regard I think both parties can benefit from Shedd's sense of proportion.

Unfortunately, the acrimony that can exist between Calvinists and Arminians has sometimes worked against such cooperation. Some Calvinists, though certainly not all, harbor a much less charitable view of Arminianism than Shedd did, and actually label it "another gospel."⁵⁷ Likewise, there are Arminians who set up straw man arguments against Calvinists. For example, one well-known evangelical Arminian scholar stated at a talk delivered at my school, "The Augustinian-Calvinistic view [of God's sovereignty] seems, in effect, to turn God into the Devil." Such characterizations not only are untrue but patently unfair and profoundly unhelpful.

While I certainly think it is appropriate for even vigorous—or, as Shedd was wont to say, "manly"—interaction and disagreement on such

⁵⁴*Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*, "Denominational Unity Undesirable," 250–51.

⁵⁵*Obstacles and Rewards of Orthodoxy*, 17–18.

⁵⁶*Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*, "Denominational Unity Undesirable," 252.

⁵⁷Though I have not seen it myself, a good friend of mine actually saw a bumper sticker that reads, "Arminianism: Another Gospel."

questions as election, free will and the nature and source of regenerating grace, I nevertheless would urge Arminians and Calvinists to consider that there may be bigger fish to fry, so to speak. In the current state of things the "luxury" of internecine warfare may no longer exist. As evangelicalism faces a revival of key Socinian themes in the "openness" theology, there is no better time for Calvinists and Arminians to unite against those who would enervate the foundations of their common historic, biblical faith.