

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 TWO (cont.)

The Principle of Protestantism

The Principle of Protestantism was originally Schaff's address given at his inauguration as professor in the Mercersburg Seminary. After it stirred great controversy, it was expanded to book form and served to make a defense of Schaff's viewpoints on history and the nature of the church. The inauguration service took place in Reading, Pennsylvania on October 25, 1844. While Schaff's words may have seemed perfectly normal if delivered in Germany, among individualistic, independent-minded Americans and in an anti-Romanist climate, it must have raised questions in the minds of some who heard it (certainly Joseph Berg) as to whether or not a big mistake had been made in calling Schaff from Germany to train German Reformed pastors in the United States.

German identity was being celebrated among the Reformed churches in North America. They wanted to promote what was German and NOT merge with another denomination. But when they heard what was German, those who had received a taste of the freedom of religious expression in America did not want to be bridled in their thoughts or worship or liturgy by German thinking.¹ The Heidelberg Catechism as a defining doctrinal statement was not being given the attention it had once held. The liturgy of the Palatinate was replaced by extemporaneous prayer in worship, and a Zwinglian view of the Lord's Supper was firmly in place in many congregations. And in many places the Eucharist was observed only twice a year. Revivalism had been a growing force in the denomination since 1828. One pastor of the time (Bomberger) saw the denomination as seeking middle ground between rationalistic formalism and

¹ In his introduction to *The Principle of Protestantism* Nevin promoted Schaff's thinking as fully German and defended him by saying that he should not have to leave behind German thought when he came to America to teach (pp. 28-29). He further explained that neither German nor American religion was flawless, but that both must work together to supplement each other (pp. 31-32).

revivalism (“no fire” versus “wild fire”).² Because of the declining knowledge of the German heritage and the Americanizing of the German Reformed Church in North America, in spite of a shared desire to be distinctly German, when Nevin and Schaff became prominent figures, the result was a struggle to determine what exactly was historically German.

While Schaff would teach that the church develops and matures because it is organic, just as a human being would grow and mature and still be the same being passing through different stages of life, Berg believed that “pure and undefiled religion is as unchanging as the holiness of God from which it emanates.”³ For this reason he took great pains to show in his writings and preaching that a static, pristine state of the church may survive the centuries without contamination from the Roman Catholic Church which was antichrist. To propose to Berg that Protestantism had any connection whatsoever with Medieval Catholicism would have sounded as an heretical absurdity to him. Yet this is what Schaff did.

Schaff did not see the greatest danger to the German Reformed Church to be Romanism. He pointed the finger at rationalism. That rationalism could take the form of anti-supernaturalism and a denial of the miracles of the Bible, but more often it began with an individual subjectivism that claimed to promote literal interpretation of the Bible and that was a part of the Puritan system of ecclesiology and was fostered by the American setting which promoted personal freedom and independence above any sense of belonging to a higher body (like the church) which exercised authority and promoted objective distinctions of truth. When the door was opened for humans to be the final determiners of truth in doctrine and practice as happened with the many sects who had no concept of church history but acted as if they were their own popes, the door was then opened to set aside larger and larger portions of the Bible, declining its authority in favor of personal viewpoint and opinion or authority. Finally the result would be a rationalistic formalism which was regarded as dead.

Schaff and Nevin proposed an antidote to the process of sectarianism and seemingly endless division in the American church which also was the seedbed for rationalism and dead formalism. It was to promote a high view (what sounded to many a Roman view) of the church, its sacraments, its clergy, its liturgy, etc. This would be done by developing an historical appreciation for how the church had matured over nineteen centuries. Schaff wrote repeatedly about Christ’s promise, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Then he put to his opponents the question as to whether Christ could have been absent from the visible church for thirteen or more centuries. He insinuated that any who thought they had recovered in their sect the only true church that existed from the time of the Apostles until the present were arrogant and blinded. Why would one take a

² Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, preface to *The Principle of Protestantism*, vol. 1 of *Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

person back to his childhood after years of maturing? Why take the church back to its childhood after centuries of development, even though error had been mixed with truth and must constantly be purged? If the church is organic, then while it never grows to be something other than the essence it possessed from the start, it does mature and change. Schaff did not see the Reformation as a return to the early church. He saw it as the maturing and purifying of a developing church. In his view, the church of the Reformation was organically related to the Medieval Roman Catholic Church. And he proposed that in a coming ecumenical age, both Protestant and Catholic would be reformed and joined into an even more glorious and refined and mature body.⁴ So much for Berg's denominational enthusiasm. Schaff would employ Hegel's thesis, antithesis, synthesis system in his own system that predicted an ever maturing, ever refining, ever reforming church until Christ's return.

In the introduction to *The Principle of Protestantism* written by John Williamson Nevin, he sought to defend Schaff against anti-Romanist attacks by presenting an eclectic philosophy of drawing the good even from a bad system and preserving what is true. He claimed that Schaff's work did not promote Romanism or the Puseyite movement,⁵ but instead looked forward. He warned against those who would blindly rush to eradicate an heretical group's influence without gleaning from that group any truth imprisoned in their errors. He said that when the prison of errors was demolished, the truth could then be liberated. In other words, when one makes war against Romanism, effort should be expended to preserve what is true within that corrupt system.⁶ The truth one group maintains must be reconciled with the truth its opponents possess. This is the path of progress. Christ came not to destroy Judaism, but to fulfill it. Schaff applied the same model to the Reformation, which he said was not meant to destroy the historic church but to fulfill, by leading it to the next level of truth and religion.⁷

However, Christianity was complete in Christ. The incarnation was a special creative act of God. It was a new birth and not a reformation of the Old Testament. It is complete in Christ and there will be no new birth which creates something beyond the church. The church can progress through evangelism or in its cultivation of a fuller understanding of doctrine, life, constitution and worship.⁸ If the church passes through stages of infancy, youth, adulthood, etc., the absolute character of Christianity does not change. The Church brought to the sixteenth century the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, the two natures of

⁴ Schaff, *Principle*, 216.

⁵ This was a movement from Oxford which tended toward a return to Roman Catholicism in order to escape the troubles caused by sectarianism. Schaff deals in depth with this group in chapter four of *The Principle of Protestantism* where he rejects their ways of approaching sects.

⁶ John Williamson Nevin, "Foreword" to *The Principle of Protestantism*, vol. 1 of *Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 34.

⁷ Schaff, *Principle*, 58.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

Christ, etc. In the maturing process, the time of the Reformation was the flowering of the doctrine of soteriology.⁹

It would be foolish to embrace everything that is the opposite of Romanism for the sole reason that it is the opposite of Romanism. Neither Schaff nor the Reformers sought to reject Romanism completely. Nevin and Schaff believed the Protestant movement in America had gone in directions that would shock the Reformers if they could see how their efforts were being credited with nineteenth century results.

In his introduction Nevin further summarized the philosophy behind Schaff's thinking by confronting those who reject the visible forms of religion found in the Roman church because they seem to be dead. Those same folks turn inward and focus on the Spirit and living piety. But does the answer lie in an either/or solution? Nevin explains that religion is about union of body and soul, spirit and matter, so how could one claim to embrace substance apart from form?¹⁰ Those who reject form in favor of what they consider substance commit a similar error to those who hold to a form without substance.

Next Nevin draws attention to a logical battleground for the conflict between those who embrace spirit in the place of form or vice versa – salvation. Is salvation an individual, spiritual, inward concern only, a private transaction with God, or is it mediated through the church, available through the mystical body of Christ and the sacraments?¹¹ Instead of an either/or dilemma, the Mercersburg Theology proposes a both/and scenario. A personality such as Berg could not embrace such a living tension between two sides. Just because a high view of the church is done poorly by Rome or the Puseyites does not mean that a low regard for the church and its history is the answer. Nevin said, "Individualism without the church is as little to be trusted as ecclesiasticism without individual experience."¹² While the church cannot be the sole interpreter of Scripture for the individual, neither can the individual interpreter reject all authority of the church.

In his first chapter Schaff explains that no work as vast as the Reformation could be the product of a single person in a single day (Luther, October 31, 1517). Luther gave voice to what was already dimly present in many regions of Europe.¹³ The roots of the Reformation stem back to Pentecost. He believed that the papacy was built on the Roman way of life – the end justifies the means, a confidence of perpetual stability, iron constancy, grasping after universal dominion, etc. He said, "The papacy is a Christian universal monarchy, erected on the popular spirit of ancient Rome."¹⁴ The Reformation included eradicating

⁹ Ibid., 78.

¹⁰ Nevin, *Principle*, 36.

¹¹ Ibid., 36-37.

¹² Ibid., 37.

¹³ Schaff, *Principle*, 59.

¹⁴ Ibid., 61.

“popedom from the heart” which easily falls prey to embracing idols of human authority.¹⁵

Luther, Schaff said, reflected German society. He characterized Germans as having “indomitable energy, earnest childlike integrity and simplicity, unaffected humility, and a predominant tendency toward the world of thought and feeling.”¹⁶ In Luther there was an element of Augustinian, mystic tradition which focused on exercises of the heart and direct communion with God.¹⁷

The Roman mind, he believed, was more apt to see religion in terms of outward rules, while the German mind was more likely to emphasize inward apprehension.¹⁸ It seems God was preparing the German people as the instrument to bring the church to the next level of maturity through the study of ancient languages and other advancements in education and science. Schaff then describes various groups or individuals of the Middle Ages who either sought to bring reform or at least were proficient at pointing out error in the church. Some of these groups were hyperspiritualistic, Manichaeic or pantheistic.¹⁹ In other words, they failed to strike the proper tension between body and spirit. Many of them were deeply immersed in the Scriptures, perhaps even having memorized them. There were notables who embraced the Augustinian doctrine of grace as opposed to bondage to law or a system of works righteousness.²⁰ They were characterized often by strict virtue and simplicity. And they were persecuted horribly by the Roman church as they protested the corrupt abuses in the established church. Schaff claimed that in all of these elements the Catholic Church “pressed with inward necessity toward Protestantism” just as Judaism at one time was appointed by God to prepare for Christianity.²¹ Instead of speaking of the Roman church in terms of hatred, while he acknowledged the errors and corruption within it, he believed that it was a ward of the nations, using its law to keep them until they would come to maturity and freedom in the Reformation. Law caused persons like Luther to reach beyond it toward full righteousness and reconciliation with the Lawgiver.²² In another work Schaff wrote that the mystic school of the Middle Ages was the “most active agent in preparing the way for the Reformation.”²³ Years later Schaff would assess the American church as lacking depth and true mysticism

¹⁵ Ibid., 78.

¹⁶ Ibid., 62.

¹⁷ Ibid., 69.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 67.

²⁰ Ibid., 70.

²¹ Ibid., 71.

²² Ibid., 72.

²³ Schaff, “What Is Church History,” 37.

altogether.²⁴ Imagine how it sounded to Berg when Schaff said that “The Reformation is the legitimate offspring, the greatest act of the Catholic Church”!²⁵

The American spirit was eager to throw off all visible authority or rule. Thus came about many splits and division in churches who sensed they were unrestrained by any authority in the church. While Schaff described the concept of the infallibility of the pope as the sin of “creature deification,”²⁶ his understanding of the Reformation was not that it promoted such an unruly escape from all authority and rule, but that it sought to bind the heart to God’s grace and conscience to the Word of God.²⁷ Mercersburg Theology did not see that binding of the heart as automatically ruling out the continuing existence of authority within the church. Subjectivism can easily run afoul. Adherence of the conscience to the Word of God, said Schaff, was not the central principle of Protestantism, because all the sects, for example Unitarians, claimed to have their consciences bound to the Word of God.

The “material principle of the Reformation” is “justification of the sinner before God by the merit of Christ alone through faith.”²⁸ In contrast to the teachings of the Roman church, Schaff taught that humans cannot participate in their own conversion or justification. He distinguished between the Protestant view of justification and the Roman view which held that the ground of justification is Christ’s death, but that the work of Christ only laid the foundation for salvation, and that justification is a process that the believer works which resembles sanctification. In other words for the Catholic, grace only becomes complete by the good works a person might do. That implies human works contain merit and that humans can achieve perfection through their works, and that they may even store up extra merit to help others.²⁹ Schaff rejected the Catholic system, agreeing with the Reformed doctrine that humans are polluted by sin and unable to respond in faith, being corrupted in will and unable to produce good apart from the presence of the life-giving Spirit of God and His gracious work to regenerate the heart.³⁰ After reading this section, it would be hard to accuse Schaff of trying to return to the Roman church and easy to see why he denounced Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism.

In addition to what Schaff described as the material principle of Protestantism (justification by faith alone), he defined the formal principle, or the underlying principle of knowledge, to be the fact that the Word of God, consisting of sixty-six books, “is the pure and proper source as well as the only certain measure of all

²⁴ Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of the Political, Social, and Religious Character of the United States of North America, in Two Lectures* (New York: C. Scribner, 1855), 113.

²⁵ Schaff *Principle*, 73.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 86,87.

saving truth.”³¹ It would be difficult to assert, after reading Schaff’s defense of the formal principle, that he elevated tradition over Scripture as Berg claimed he did. In fact, Schaff denounces the Roman system of placing greater priority on tradition than on Scripture.³² He says that for the Protestant, tradition’s worth is evaluated based on how it agrees with the Word of God.³³ The Reformation, then, according to Schaff, elevated God’s works and words over human works and words.³⁴ It affirmed that God’s Word is not lacking or incomplete, as if tradition could make up for any alleged deficiencies or was necessary to assist in granting understanding.³⁵ It promoted the doctrine of the perspicuity of the Scriptures, that the Scriptures alone are sufficient to reveal the way of salvation to an individual without tradition or councils, but only by God’s gracious working in the heart and mind of that person.³⁶

Schaff affirmed a right role that tradition may play in the church as a guide, as long as those traditions are in subjection to Holy Scripture. He describes ritual traditions which are ancient and pertain to church order and worship and includes here clergy, church festivals, specifications for discipline, use of symbols such as the sign of the cross, etc.³⁷ While helpful, they are not to be regarded as normative such as they are in the Roman system. Dr. Schaff accused Puritanism of being too rash in its zeal to purify the church. Puritans sacrificed beautiful traditions because of a “false spiritualistic tendency,” stressing only inward religion to the exclusion of outward.³⁸

Next *The Principle of Protestantism* considers historical tradition. Included in this category is the genuineness of the sixty-six canonical books, their authorship and date of writing and place of origin.³⁹⁴⁰ Regarding what the author terms dogmatico-moral tradition, the Roman church places authority on the doctrines of the Middle Ages such as worship of Mary and the saints, indulgences, purgatory, etc. Protestants reject each of these as being human creations and contrary to the Holy Spirit. But Protestantism, Schaff argues, does allow for tradition regarding the unfolding and development of doctrine and understanding of the Bible and which expresses the truths of the Bible.⁴¹ In a footnote he cites Calvin

³¹ Ibid., 98.

³² The Council of Trent affirmed that tradition, as the unwritten Word of God, also is the authoritative product of the Holy Spirit (p. 99). Such traditions included the sacrifice of the mass, purgatory, worship of the saints, the forty-day fast before Easter, etc. (p. 102).

³³ Ibid., 98.

³⁴ Ibid., 99.

³⁵ Ibid., 101.

³⁶ Ibid., 108.

³⁷ Ibid., 110, 111.

³⁸ Ibid., 112.

³⁹ Ibid., 113-114.

⁴⁰ Schaff did not state that the determination of the canon of Scripture was dependent on the church’s reasoning, but that the books of the Bible contain self-evidencing power through the Holy Spirit who convinces the church they are true (p. 121).

⁴¹ Ibid., 115-116, 118.

who acknowledged that one cannot claim God as Father who rejects the church as mother. There is a body of truth contained in the church and transmitted from one generation to the next (citing here Matthew 28:20 and 1 Timothy 3:15). Calvin reproved those who sought to separate from the "reigning church."⁴² Schaff would not deny that there are always errors mixed with truth as was the case in the Middle Ages and also with Protestantism in his own day. Luther and Calvin held to the supreme authority of God's Word but retained ecumenical symbols passed down through centuries. Their rejection of the Roman church was far different than that of Berg and many others in America. Because of Roman extremes the Reformers had to focus on justification by faith and on the authority of Scripture and on preaching. However, this does not mean holiness and love or tradition and sacrament should be overlooked or even rejected.⁴³

In the latter half of the book the author begins to relate the principles of Protestantism to his own day and the state of the church he can observe around him. He names rationalism as a disease of Protestantism and calls it "one-sided theoretic subjectivism."⁴⁴ The roots of this movement can be traced to currents in the Lutheran church which began with a creative period which concluded with the Formula of Concord, and was followed by a period when the details of theology were defined. The Scriptures were elevated to be regarded almost as magical and the natural or human side of the holy writings was eclipsed. This laid the groundwork for an opposite movement led by Spener called Pietism which with its emphasis on holiness and practice contrasted with the merely outward intellectual forms of religion that preceded it. This pietism presented true religion as simple morality and good citizenship or faith in action. When the church and her symbols were undervalued, the Apostles and their writings became undervalued, which led eventually to a denial of the deity of Christ and a full demonstration of rationalism.⁴⁵

Semler, the founder of the rationalistic view had a pietistic background and combined with it a strong prejudice against the ruling church.⁴⁶ Such rationalism set aside the Protestant principle of justification and embraced Pelagianism while it denied the idea of a divine Person coordinating history toward a goal.⁴⁷ Rationalism lowered its regard for the Bible to be no more an authority than other human books. History and doctrine were regarded as a product of human imagination and personality distinctions. It retained only the being of God, His providence and the freedom and immortality of humans, focusing greatly on morality.⁴⁸ The concepts of the Reformers that humans cannot redeem

⁴² Ibid., 117.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 225 (thesis forty-four).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 130, 131.

⁴⁶ Schaff, "What Is Church History," 82.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁸ Schaff, *Principle*, 132.

themselves nor can the natural mind judge the Scriptures was discarded.⁴⁹ Without God's gracious working rationalism is no more than human reflection, Schaff maintained. True reason penetrates the supernatural, the infinite, the essence of things. He explained in a footnote that "Reason, then, in its inmost nature, is a receptive faculty that must go beyond itself for its contents."⁵⁰ Rather than attacking Rome, Schaff charged Protestants to clean their own house.⁵¹ Rationalism had thrust out the eyes of Christianity and torn its heart out.⁵²

Another disease Schaff perceived in Protestantism is sectarianism or "one-sided practical subjectivism."⁵³ While rationalism seemed to grow more naturally from Lutheranism, sectarianism (or sectarianism as Schaff sometimes calls it) grows more freely from the Reformed church. Here Schaff attempted to distinguish the two based roughly on national characteristics. The Germans were farther accomplished in deep thinking and contemplation. On the other hand the English were more outward focused on practical life, committed to order and strong character more than philosophy and art. His observation was that the English have fewer doctrinal sources of disagreement and division than they do about the constitution and forms of the church.⁵⁴ His opinion was that Puritanism was reactionary and made war on form of every type as if the body and everything outward was evil. (Nevin would accuse Berg of being a Puritan.) Sects, Schaff conceded, usually had a valid reason to protest (e.g., dead formalism), but they became so one-sided in their reaction that they also were lacking. He noted that a subjectivism corrupted by sin can produce selfish isolation, confusion and licentiousness. Of course, he also said that corrupted objectivity could produce stagnation and petrification.⁵⁵ The Mercersburg philosophy is summed up in the statement "The perfection of both is the union of both."⁵⁶

It seems Schaff would lead one to believe that Puritanism's outward concern is very personal and subjective, and that when a failure of life occurs, there is no orthodoxy vested in an objective church to preserve it. In order to preserve individual authority, centuries of church authority that was a proper expression of the authority of God's Word were discarded. Therefore Christians from Puritan beginnings frequently turn to Unitarianism. In other words, they threw off the tradition of centuries which served as a channel of carrying Biblical doctrine forward in history.⁵⁷ Without that channel, they would foster anarchy and sectarianism. Anyone with a subjective, inward experience and the ability to tell about it would gain a following and probably start a new church. Speaking of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 134.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 134.

⁵¹ Ibid., 137.

⁵² Schaff, "What Is Church History," 87.

⁵³ Schaff, *Principle*, 140.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 141-144.

⁵⁵ Schaff, *America*, 122.

⁵⁶ Schaff, *Principle*, 169.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 147-148.

such persons he declares, "He builds himself of a night accordingly a new chapel, in which now for the first time since the age of the apostles a pure congregation is to be formed."⁵⁸ Schaff characterized their way of religion as an abstract spiritualism which had low regard for history and promoted revolutionary tendencies.⁵⁹ From them sprang jealousy and malice and contention in abundance. The Reformers had never promoted such uncontrolled freedom of religion. Schaff warned that the greater danger the church faces than the pope in Rome is a Protestantism filled with many popes who would enslave the church once again to human authority.⁶⁰

Not everything Schaff said about the Puritans was negative. He appreciated their fearless determinism, the many immigrants who had been converted through their ministry, their zeal for honoring the Sabbath and a deep moral earnestness they often possessed.⁶¹ The danger Schaff identified in these movements was their one-sided subjectivism.

Schaff's view of the future is optimistic.⁶² This optimism does not deny the progressive worsening of evil but is confident that in the end Christ's kingdom will prevail.⁶³ In fact, heresies, schisms and evil will be used by the sovereign God to mature the church.⁶⁴ He sees divine guidance at work to produce a final result of a world permeated with unified Christianity as Christ's kingdom which will permeate art, science, government and social life.⁶⁵ This is because the church in union with the God-man is secure and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it.⁶⁶ He wrote, "The recognition of God in history is the first principle of all sound philosophy of history He who denies the hand of Providence in the affairs of the world and the church is intellectually or spiritually blind."⁶⁷

He is gracious in his approach to his opponents and always looks for the good in each movement he encounters. He believed that rationalism and sectarianism point out the importance of subjectivity and individuality and singleness and

⁵⁸ Ibid., 149.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 146.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 154.

⁶¹ Ibid., 147.

⁶² See the analogy he borrows from Schelling which speculates about the Apostles Peter, Paul and John representing three phases of development in the church (pp. 216-218). According to this analogy, Peter acts as a sort of Moses figure of the New Testament who represents God the Father and under whose instruction the principle of law/authority became Catholicism. The next phase in the church's maturing process is represented by Paul, the apostle of God the Son, who brought forth justification by faith and is represented by Protestantism. It is a time when law and Gospel, authority and freedom must be united. The Roman church, like Peter, has denied her Lord, but will one day repent. The third era is future and is represented by the Apostle John who signifies the era of the Holy Spirit. This will be an era of unity and will precede the appearance of Christ's coming.

⁶³ Thesis eighteen, p. 222.

⁶⁴ Thesis twenty-three, p. 222.

⁶⁵ See theses nine and ten on pp. 220-221.

⁶⁶ Schaff, "What is Church History," 53.

⁶⁷ Quoted in the Introduction to *Reformed and Catholic*, p. 7.

independence. But such things should not be permitted to trump objectivity, generality, church authority, law, etc.⁶⁸ While striving to be impartial and to look for the good in each sect or branch of the church, Schaff warned against indifferentism in “What Is Church History” in this way: “He that begins by holding all religions and confessions in like value, will soon end by holding them to be alike without any value.”⁶⁹

While he was pleased to represent a German perspective he looked forward to a more mature Christianity which would include the best of both German and English religion in North America. He looked to the church as the mother of Christians of all countries from which they derive religious life. “She is the power of the objective and general to which the subjective and single should ever be subordinate.” Only by subordination to the church will the Christian be truly free. Without such submission, personal piety cannot come to perfection because of the organic nature of the believer’s life in Christ and the nature of the church as the body of Christ. Schaff likens a believer separated from the church to a limb separated from the body or a branch from the vine.⁷⁰ He asserted that Christ is present supernaturally in His Body, the Church, as the soul is present in a human body.⁷¹ Christ, the God-man, brought humanity to perfection in Himself, reconciling it to God and raising it to a vital union with Himself.

Therefore, the church, according to Schaff, is the organic unity of all believers who operate in union with their Head, Jesus, in order to accomplish His will.⁷² Through Word and sacrament and the power of the Holy Spirit the church is engaged while on earth in a real, mystical, invisible union with Christ and may be regarded as the continuation of the life and work of Christ on earth, a continuation of His incarnation.⁷³ Thus the visible church, which includes unbelievers who will in the end be lost, is still significant and cannot be abandoned for unchurchly hyperspiritualism (the way he viewed many Puritans). Schaff said, “Church membership is not the *principle* of salvation – which is Christ alone – but the necessary *condition* of it; because it is the divinely appointed means of bringing the man into contact with Christ and all his benefits.”⁷⁴

He believed that the church can possess truth and “live upon it” before she properly becomes conscious of it (e.g., the Trinity before Athanasius, grace and human freedom before Augustine or the evangelical doctrine of justification

⁶⁸ Thesis eighty-seven, p. 230.

⁶⁹ Schaff, “What Is Church History,” 42.

⁷⁰ Principle, Theses eleven and twelve, p. 221.

⁷¹ Schaff, “What Is Church History,” 48.

⁷² Philip Schaff, “General Introduction to Church History,” in Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. and George M. Bricker, ed., *Reformed and Catholic: Selected Historical and Theological Writings of Philip Schaff*, Pittsburgh Original Texts and Translation Series #4, ed., Dikran Y. Hadidian (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1979), 163-164.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 165-166, 175.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

before the Reformation).⁷⁵ He likens this to a child who eats long before having knowledge of food.

Schaff was influenced by Schleiermacher whom he recognized as the greatest theologian since the Reformation. He believed that Schleiermacher placed Christ, the Redeemer and Author of new life, at the center of theology and opened the door for a churchly viewpoint of history and the world. Infallible truth is to be found in Christ; the Scriptures present the life of Christ to be appropriated by believers inwardly and outwardly until the entire fullness of objective Christianity which is the life of Christ will be realized universally. The church is the heir of God's promises and representative of God's truth in the world. The life and doctrine of the church is moveable and flowing with unity and coherence toward a God-ordained goal of maturity (Matthew 13:31-33; Ephesians 4:12-13) under the direction of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁶ Thus for Schaff, the nature of the church is organic, a new creation unfolding from within, with each new stage negating the one before it as manhood negates boyhood.⁷⁷ Christ as the second Adam introduced new life which will overcome all contradiction and extremes in the church by defeating sin and evil that the first Adam unleashed. To borrow from Nevin, just as Adam's headship was more than covenantal resulting in more than merely the imputation of sin to humans, so Christ's union with His body is organic and is more than the imputation of righteousness. Believers are placed in possession of real righteousness.⁷⁸ This work of Christ is realized gradually in the church.⁷⁹ The next stage of church history which he anticipated would be neither Protestant nor Catholic. He referred to it as evangelical Catholicity or churchly Protestantism.⁸⁰

Schaff's faith in God's sovereign rule over the universe led him to believe that God can produce good from diseases in the church. He explained three possibilities of human response to such disease – restoration, which moves backwards in the progress of the church to an earlier period of maturity; revolution, which is violent; or reformation which is improvement or productive advancement.⁸¹ He said that “The mainstream of development, though full of turns, moves always forward.”⁸² Thus, for Schaff, because God is at work in each time period, every epoch of history has worth.⁸³ Such a high view of God's providence led him to conclude that “. . . it is not we that make history, but history that makes us.”⁸⁴ In other words, the objective direction of history trumps any subjective apprehension of it or contribution to it. He proclaimed the foolishness

⁷⁵ *Principle*, Thesis sixteen, pp. 221, 222.

⁷⁶ Schaff, “What Is Church History,” 94, 96, 97, 98, 103, 104.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

⁷⁸ Littlejohn, 60.

⁷⁹ Schaff, “What Is Church History,” 109.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 116-117, 119.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 122.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

of attempting to assert one's individuality over the authority of all history and to freely discard a period such as the Middle Ages as if it were useless and God was not at work during that period.⁸⁵ ⁸⁶ Such humility regarding history will tend toward producing unity.⁸⁷ Yet the professor did not advocate abandoning all doctrinal distinctives, but that Christians hold to them with humility and seek the truth in their opponents' positions as well.⁸⁸

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⁸⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁸⁶ Schaff credits the Roman church with rescuing the Germanic peoples from barbarism by enforcing parental style law and setting the stage for the Reformation while making real contributions of poetry, art, politics, science, theology and religion. Hardly could the Middle Ages be called the Dark Ages in Schaff's opinion. However, he noted that Catholic rule then degenerated into tyranny over conscience and thought which set the stage for the pendulum to swing toward personal freedom during and after the time of the Reformation ("General Introduction to Church History," 207, 265).

⁸⁷ Ibid., 138.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 140, 143.