

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 Understanding of the Church in Nevin's Writings

The following are brief introductions and overviews to some of the concepts in Nevin's works which have bearing on the church question as developed in the Mercersburg Theology. Schaff and Nevin were in harmony with each other, and Schaff spoke very highly of his colleague at the seminary. One important work is titled *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* and will be considered more in depth in a later chapter.

The Anxious Bench

This work was first published in 1843 as a response to revivalism in the tradition of Finney which was invading many German churches in America. These "New Measures" to which Nevin responded were an attempt to revive a church that seemed to be dead, strangled by formality. The author made it clear from the beginning that he was not opposed to revivals, prayer meetings, seeking converts, missions societies, etc.¹ What he did oppose were decision displays at the request of the preacher, noise and disorder, and the attempt to acquire justification by feelings instead of by faith.² Use of a bench on which the anxious could sit during a revival service in order to attempt to see them make a decision to accept Jesus may have produced numerical results, but numerical results to not prove that it is proper or that real salvation is produced. Nevin advocated relying on truth and not the anxious bench to move people toward Christ.³ The method appealed to people whose feelings ruled over their judgment. They were often controlled by impulse and not reflection. In true religion the inward unfolds

¹ John Williamson Nevin, "The Anxious Bench," second edition (Chambersburg: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1844), in *The Anxious Bench; Antichrist; and the Sermon Catholic Unity*, Augustine Thompson, ed. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers), 14-15.

² *Ibid.*, 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 23.

into the outward. Nevin saw the pattern reversed in the use of the anxious bench and did not refrain from calling it quackery.⁴ To him it appeared that revivalists were attempting to make up in the flesh what was lacking in the spirit.

Nevin advocated the tried and true method of discipleship that used the Heidelberg Catechism. He said, "Let the power of religion be present in the soul of him who is called to serve at the altar, and no strange fire will be needed to kindle the sacrifice."⁵ In the context of all the talk in Mercersburg Theology about the visible church, the visible practice of the anxious bench did not fit because it was unchurchly and rejected much of what resembled historic Christian practice as if anything but revivalism was dead religion, and it was not rooted in the life of Christ but in gimmicks. It abounded with subjectivity. Nevin saw tricks of the New Measures as a refuge for weakness and laziness for those who did not wish to cultivate inward strength.⁶ Rather than making the goal of spirituality to be groaning, clapping, screaming or drawing a big crowd,⁷ Nevin recommended that the spiritual life be demonstrated by vigilance, sobriety, good behavior, lack of self-will, being slow to anger as well as just, holy and temperate, ruling one's own house well, grasping sound doctrine, pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness, purity, etc.⁸

Anger must have been awakened when the opponents of Mercersburg read in this pamphlet that demanding sinners humble themselves by means of the anxious bench was no different than the Roman church calling a convert to crawl the aisles of the church on his knees.⁹ Nevin characterized the anxious bench as Pelagian as it assumes salvation is a product of the human will and does not focus on being a new creation in Christ by God's gracious power. True religion is rooted in something beyond the individual, not in one's own flesh. The power of salvation more apprehends a person than the person apprehends it. Again here is Mercersburg defending the objective working of God within a society that promoted and exalted subjectivism. A soul in organic union with Christ would not need to depend on fanatical displays in order to come to maturity. Those who practiced anxious bench spirituality regarded the church as an abstraction instead of an organic unity. The system of catechetical instruction recognizes the organic life of the church, seeking life in the church as its mother and not expecting to impart life to her by subjective energy.¹⁰

The system of the anxious bench focused on a point of conversion rather than on a catechism study rooted in family worship, prayer and godly living. It

⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁷ Nevin believed that such crying out and excitement formed a "rude familiarity with the High and Holy One" (p. 57). In its place he promoted reverence as a sign of genuine devotion.

⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰ Ibid., 67.

downplayed the regular duty of the pastor who ministers Word and sacrament. It emphasized mechanical means to produce results rather than the unfolding of the organic life from within.¹¹ The system of catechizing must not be allowed to become empty or divorced from living piety.

Antichrist; or the Spirit of Sect and Schism

This work was published in 1848. In the preface Nevin defends himself against the criticism of Dr. Hodge at Princeton regarding *The Mystical Presence*. In those criticisms Hodge accused Nevin of being too heavily influenced by Schleiermacher. He further accused Nevin of pantheism, naturalism, mysticism, denying the Holy Spirit's work, etc. He assessed Nevin's theology as overly integrating the natural and the supernatural.¹² In response Nevin acknowledged Schleiermacher's influence in German thinking and also that his system resulted in many errors. But Schleiermacher's thinking was not to be wholly discarded because of the presence of some error. He had stood in the face of a faithless generation and tried to defend Christianity rationally.

The work focuses on the significance of the incarnation, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. The early church saw Christ as a life-giving Spirit and believed that the new creation flowed organically from His person through a mystical union to believers. The pamphlet understands Hodge to deny organic union with Adam or Christ in terms of the relation of a root and branches sharing a common life. His concept of union with Christ included only an abstract idea of forensic imputation of righteousness.^{13 14}

Nevin explains that many heresies are rooted in a false concept of the incarnation (1 John 4:1-3). Christ appeared in the flesh in order to accomplish salvation. Partaking of His life and not merely agreeing with doctrine or keeping law is necessary for salvation.¹⁵ Christianity is the supernatural brought into real, organic, abiding union with the natural, raising it up to its own sphere and filling it with powers it did not possess before.¹⁶ That would make believers to participate in the very humanity of Christ which bond would form the "broadest and deepest form of humanity."¹⁷ Christ's humanity is the medium of salvation and is applied

¹¹ Ibid., 69, 70.

¹² Littlejohn, 20.

¹³ John Williamson Nevin, "Antichrist; or the Spirit of Sect and Schism" (New York: John S. Taylor, 1848) in *The Anxious Bench; Antichrist; and the Sermon Catholic Unity*, Augustine Thompson, ed. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers), 13 (footnote).

¹⁴ Nevin, the former Presbyterian distanced himself from Presbyterianism by claiming that he preferred the Heidelberg Catechism over the Westminster Catechism because the Westminster focused on "cold workmanship of understanding" and rational dogmatics, whereas the Heidelberg was regarded to be "full of feeling and faith" and congenial toward the sacraments. (Quotation take from James D. Bratt, "Christian Reformed History in German Mirrors," *Calvin Theological Journal* 42, no. 1 (April 2007): 24.

¹⁵ Nevin, "Antichrist," 17.

¹⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

not to every person in the world, but to new humanity, the Church.¹⁸ In Christ were united both human and divine natures, and He became a fountain of new life for believers. “The incarnation is the proper completion of humanity.”¹⁹ This is known as the theanthropic mystery.²⁰ On this point the historian Good believes Nevin went too far and blended or intermingled the two natures of Christ. Nevin held that because of the close union of Christ’s two natures that His humanity is also present at the Lord’s Supper.²¹

This mystical union Nevin promoted is not wholly constituted in doctrinal understanding. He gives an analogy of an infant who clings to his mother, not because he believes a logical truth about her, but because he simply recognizes and desires her.²² He sees Christianity as the outworking of the life of Christ in this world (just as Schaff did) and thus holds to the principle of organic development of church history.²³ In contrast to these views of organic union with Christ, Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), the successor to the great Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards, believed that union with Christ was only agreement of the heart with Christ, which devalued the church to a voluntary society.²⁴

First John 2:18, 22 and 2 John 7 are cited as texts that identify antichrist heresies as being related to the incarnation. The pamphlet then examines early conflicts in the church which debated the existence of and relationship of the two natures of Christ, including Gnosticism, Ebionism, Docetism, Manichaeism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism, etc. Pelagianism, Nevin says, takes human corruption too lightly and instead of relying on a supernatural new creation in Christ attempts simply to rouse the old creation. Thus the effect of the incarnation is practically denied. In the Middle Ages the controversy played out between such Pelagianism and a magical spirituality where the natural could be somehow fantastically overwhelmed by the supernatural but which lacked true organic union of the divine and human.²⁵

In the Protestant era the controversy shows itself in that rationalism mirrors the Ebionitic position, rejecting anything more than common human life in Christ’s person.²⁶ Sectarianism, on the other hand, seems to have a natural affinity with

¹⁸ Littlejohn, 60-61.

¹⁹ John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*, Augustine Thompson, ed. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 188. Originally published by J. B. Lippincott & Col., Philadelphia, 1846.

²⁰ Good protested that in making justification the impartation of Christ’s theanthropic life to believers, that “This virtually means that we are justified only so far as we are sanctified,” (p. 304) or only so far as we are constantly partaking of Christ.

²¹ Good, 298, 301.

²² Nevin, “Antichrist,” 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁴ Littlejohn, 23.

²⁵ Nevin, “Antichrist,” 35.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

Gnosticism or Docetism, stressing the spiritual side of Christianity.²⁷ Each of these fall into the category of antichristian. Nevin adhered to the union of the two distinct natures into one personal unity, an undivided consciousness.²⁸

Included in this defense is a listing of marks Nevin considers to be that of antichrist. In his explanation of the first point, which is that antichrist does not recognize a real mediation between God and man as necessary for Christian salvation, the author says that Christ is regarded as merely the occasion by which persons are brought to God and not the real medium of it. Christ could then be reduced to an idea or an inner light in the soul.²⁹

Secondly, antichrist undervalues the mystery of Christ's person, and His person then is no longer the main point of Christianity. Only by what He speaks and does are believers redeemed. Again, the Messiah is reduced to a concept to be grasped by the mind. The incarnation is reduced in importance and functions (by analogy) as an altar on which the sacrifice of atonement can be made.³⁰

The third mark of antichrist is that the church is no longer understood as a real and supernatural constitution in the world. Instead, the reality of the church is spiritualized, and the invisible is emphasized, emphasizing subjective thought, feeling or pious action, with little regard for the holy, catholic church.³¹ "Where the sense of a real Christ is wanting, there can be . . . no sense of a real Church."³² This leads into the fourth mark which is a low view of ministry and the sacraments and Christian worship in general. In an antichristian system, the visible and invisible are separated in the sacraments and so they are no longer regarded as a means of grace.³³

In contrast to where the antichristian system leads, Nevin said, "The power of Christian worship consists in this, that the worshipers be filled with the sense of a common church life, and present themselves in this consciousness as a living sacrifice to God. Its whole conception requires that it should move in the sphere of the objective, and not fall over to the sway of simply individual thought or feeling."³⁴ Worship that falls under the sway of individual thought or feeling eventually becomes empty.

A fifth mark of antichrist is a contempt for history and authority. It no longer honors the church as the divine life or new creation introduced in the incarnation.

²⁷ Ibid., 36-37.

²⁸ Littlejohn, 59.

²⁹ Nevin, "Antichrist", 38.

³⁰ Ibid., 39-40.

³¹ Nevin named Hodge a Docetic or Nestorian because of his ecclesiology and view of the incarnation and how he compartmentalized and separated in a dualistic way the two natures of Christ. See Littlejohn, 57.

³² Nevin, "Antichrist," 50.

³³ Ibid., 40-42.

³⁴ Ibid., 42-43.

Instead, sects overvalue private judgment and individual freedom. While sectarianism professes to set humans free, Nevin's conclusion is that it actually does the opposite in cutting them off from the life of Christ in the church, and they are enslaved by their own thoughts. Thus develops a professed faith in the Bible but no faith in the church or the historical interpretation of the Bible. Nevin denounces accusations that he is promoting a blind, mechanical submission as the church of Rome demands. Nor does he deny private judgment, but such private judgment must be carried on in the light of organic unity within the life of the Church as a whole.³⁵ Such a spiritual (or hyperspiritual) emphasis as Nevin denounces in this context, also rejects form or a sense of objectivity in worship, demanding inward experience as the measure of life. In the antichrist system there exists a dualism which prohibits the spiritual and natural from ever being truly reconciled.³⁶ The abrupt conversion system fails to reach all of life because of this dualism. True Christianity is world-embracing and seeks to sanctify all parts of the Christian's life.³⁷ As such it should unify and not lead to the endless divisions as was witnessed in the American church as the Mercersburg Theology emerged.

Nevin did not advocate the dissolving of denominations or the combining of confessions. Instead he opposed the sectarian mindset. Denominations and creeds arose in order to address an essential part of Christianity which was being neglected. They were not to be regarded as an end in themselves, but as a step in the process leading to a higher order. But sects have no organic union with Christ since they spring from private willfulness and caprice, and out of their pride and arrogance they condemn the true church, promoting themselves exclusively as the holders of truth. Any sense of the universal is overpowered by a sense of the particular. However, the sense of the universal cannot be pursued by the liberal method of reducing common core belief to virtually nothing.³⁸

When a low view of the church prevails in society, church members change churches freely. When that happens ecclesiastical privileges and penalties are stripped of meaning. "Few seem," the author says, "to have the least fear of schism, if only they can lay claim in their own way, to the Bible and God's Spirit."³⁹ Reading Nevin's work one could ask of sectarians, if one can invent a personalized church environment, what would it matter whether he/she belongs to a church or not? What difference would discipline make? Who needs clergy? Is there any person who should be sought as a guide in spirituality? Nevin insisted that the "felt power of old catholic ideas as we find them reigning in the ancient Christian world" must be recovered.⁴⁰

³⁵ Ibid., 43-47.

³⁶ Ibid., 47-48.

³⁷ Ibid., 49.

³⁸ Ibid., 55-56, 61, 65-66.

³⁹ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 70.

Catholic Unity

This text was a sermon delivered by Nevin at the Triennial Convention of the German and Dutch Reformed Churches in 1844. Schaff, recently having arrived in America, was present and later requested that this sermon be printed with *The Principle of Protestantism*. The Scripture text for the sermon was Ephesians 4:4-6.

Nevin taught that the unity of the church is not something that results from the thought and purposes of its members, but instead it is the ground out of which the membership springs. Fulfillment for churches, denominations or individual believers must be found in the context of the whole church of Christ rather than in reaction against it.⁴¹ (Again, the objective supersedes the subjective.) The church is a divine organism and not the product of a democracy or human freedom. He says it another way: "The Church does not rest upon its members, but the members rest upon the Church."⁴²

In Adam humanity as a whole resided in one person. So in all ages humans are organically the same. Likewise Jesus is in Himself the new creation, and so the whole of redeemed humanity was in Him. So the church is organically the same.⁴³ Good here draws attention to what he perceives as a difference between Nevin and the old Reformed doctrine of Christ's humanity, saying that historically the Reformed faith believed that Christ took upon Himself individualized humanity for the sake of accomplishing the atonement. He refers to Nevin's idea as generic humanity by which Christ was joined to the human race. Schneck challenged whether or not there is such a thing as generic humanity.⁴⁴

The Trial of Dr. Schaff

Critics of the Mercersburg Theology claim that this new theology was a denial of Reformed truth and was merely German philosophy. They claim that in the concept of organic development church tradition was elevated above the Bible. Further, accusations are made of failing to distinguish between the two natures of Christ, of abandoning the concept of legal, forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness in justification and replacing it with organic union of Christ with the human soul, of elevating the sacraments to be means of salvation, of transforming the office of pastor into a priest who communicates the life of Christ

⁴¹ John Williamson Nevin, "Catholic Unity," in *The Anxious Bench; Antichrist; and the Sermon Catholic Unity*, Augustine Thompson, ed. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers), 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁴ Good, 300.

through sacraments and Word, and for condemning extemporaneous prayer (among other things).⁴⁵

Rev. Benjamin Schneck, who traveled to Europe as a part of the delegation to invite Dr. Krummacher to America and who then recommended Dr. Schaff for the professorship at Mercersburg, in the 1870's wrote a critique of the Mercersburg movement. He accused the Mercersburg men of being too physical in their theology. It troubled him that the cross did not get more emphasis in Nevin and Schaff's writings as compared with the incarnation.⁴⁶ When Schneck attempts to say that Nevin and Schaff are inconsistent when compared with the Reformers on this issue, Nevin's response which Schneck records indicates that the Heidelberg Catechism did not emphasize the death of Christ in such a way as to make His birth or resurrection or glorification inferior to it. Further, Nevin said that the reason the cross was so prominent in the Heidelberg Catechism was because the church was reacting to the errors of the mass, not because they meant to somehow make the incarnation inferior to it.⁴⁷

Ironically, Schneck accused Nevin and Schaff of rationalism, being subjective and reasoning from a philosophical starting point when approaching the Bible.⁴⁸ Most of the responses to Nevin and Schaff were hardly on the same intellectual level, and many made it seem as if they had not truly taken time to read their writings.

The first trial of Dr. Schaff also fell into that category of accusations made seemingly without a full understanding of *The Principle of Protestantism*. The Philadelphia Classis was strongly influenced by Rev. Berg and had a tendency toward revivalism as well as a strong anti-Roman sentiment. In the notes from their May 1844 meeting the word "deplore" was used concerning the fact that there were not as many revivals as in previous years.⁴⁹ Again in 1845 Berg was on record as lamenting the lack of "extraordinary Manifestations of divine favor in

⁴⁵ For example, see Norman Jones, "Brief Introduction to the Mercersburg Theology" in B. S. Schneck, *Mercersburg Theology: Inconsistent with Protestant and Reformed Doctrine*, electronic version, Eric D. Bristley, ed. (The Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States, 2004), 8-10. Originally published in Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1874.

⁴⁶ B. S. Schneck, *Mercersburg Theology: Inconsistent with Protestant and Reformed Doctrine*, electronic version, Eric D. Bristley, ed. (The Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States, 2004), 32, 34. Originally published in Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1874.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 39, 38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 44, footnote.

⁴⁹ "The Stated Meeting of the Philadelphia Classis held at Germantown, Penna., May 14, 1844," in *The Minutes of the Classis of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1836 to 1858 and of the "Old" Classis of Philadelphia 1820 to 1825 Compiled by Isaiah M. Rapp under the direction of The Committee on the History of the Classis of Philadelphia, 1938*," available at the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Page 1844-4

the conversion of souls” but acknowledging that some were converted “under the ordinary means of grace.”⁵⁰

At the fall meeting that year a committee was appointed which included Berg (as chairman) and four others to examine *The Principle of Protestantism*. Their conclusions were these: that the Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice and may never be undervalued in favor of human addition or tradition; that faith in Christ is the life-giving principle of Christianity and the sacraments are in this regard not superior to faith; that the sacraments without faith are unavailing (remember Judas) and depend on the spiritual state of the participant; that the ordinances of the church cannot confer religious life; that Christ is only symbolically present in the Lord’s Supper and spiritually present at all times; His presence on earth is “no longer human, but divine and spiritual.”⁵¹ They did understand and disagree with the Mercersburg idea that the humanity of Christ was present at the Lord’s Supper, but on most of the points, as they implied heresy in Schaff’s work, accusing it of violating each of the principles they affirmed, it seems they had simply not given much attention to detail. They were so eager to find a Roman Catholic connection that they failed to appreciate Schaff’s desire to combine the best of both Roman and Protestant religion with no intention of returning to Rome. A resolution was passed that the papal system is the great apostasy, “the man of sin,” “the mystery of iniquity,” “the mother of abominations of the earth” (1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-12; 2 Thessalonians 2:3,4), and destined for destruction.⁵²

The next month at the Synod meeting the Philadelphia Classis lodged its complaint against Dr. Schaff and his inaugural address. Entered immediately after that notation in the minutes is this: “The Classis of East Pennsylvania at a special meeting, expresses its full confidence in our Professors, together with their decided disapprobation of the manner in which their orthodoxy has been attacked; and authorize their delegates to advocate their position on the floor of Synod.”⁵³

No notes were kept recording the four days of debate. One report says the Berg spoke for two hours, Nevin for two hours and Schaff for three. In the end, Schaff

⁵⁰ “Stated Meeting of the Philadelphia Classis held at Trappe, Montgomery Co., May 13, 1845,” in *The Minutes of the Classis of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1836 to 1858 and of the “Old” Classis of Philadelphia 1820 to 1825 Compiled by Isaiah M. Rapp under the direction of The Committee on the History of the Classis of Philadelphia, 1938*,” available at the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Page 1845-5.

⁵¹ “The Fall Session of the Philadelphia Classis held in The First German Reformed Church, Philadelphia, Sept. 16, 1845,” in *The Minutes of the Classis of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1836 to 1858 and of the “Old” Classis of Philadelphia 1820 to 1825 Compiled by Isaiah M. Rapp under the direction of The Committee on the History of the Classis of Philadelphia, 1938*,” available at the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Pages 1845-10,11.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1845-12.

⁵³ “The Acts and Proceedings of the Synod of the German Reformed Church in the United States at York, York County, PA, October 1845” (Chambersburg: Publication Office of the Ger. Ref. Church, 1845), 23.

was vindicated by a vote of thirty-seven to three. Berg was the only ordained clergy to vote against him.⁵⁴ The synod determined that Schaff's writings affirmed Holy Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice and that he placed tradition under the authority of Scripture. In regard to the second resolution from the Philadelphia Classis, synod ruled that *The Principle of Protestantism* plainly teaches justification by faith. Then they affirmed that Schaff never named the sacraments as superior to faith. They could find nothing in the book in question which contradicted Philadelphia Classis' third resolution that sacraments are without merit if the participant lacks faith. Each of the points was dealt with in order, and on each point Schaff was vindicated.⁵⁵ Soon afterward the Ohio Synod examined *The Principle of Protestantism* and recommended it for circulation.

Berg and the Philadelphia Classis would not give up. In 1846 they resolved again at one of their own meetings similar resolutions as the year before. They continued to look for heresy in Mercersburg Theology. Two years later their minutes include a resolution defending revivals as "the grand means by which the cause of Christian benevolence is to be sustained, the purity and growth of the Church promoted, the multitudes who are without God and without hope are to be gathered into the Kingdom of Christ, and the glorious work of redemption is to be successfully carried forward to its ultimate triumph." They further resolved that those who disparage such revivals are a cause of alarm and are ungrateful and presumptuous.⁵⁶ Another resolution called on the classis itself to do more religious work in order to reverse the "suspension of divine influence" as noted by the absence of revivals.⁵⁷

In a letter to Rev. Henry Harbaugh in 1849 Berg described himself as not given over to the speculative, and while not considering himself a metaphysician, prefers what is plain and simple and matter of fact. In other words, he was a simple either/or personality while Mercersburg preferred a both/and style of determining truth.

Continuing on in his correspondence with Harbaugh he states that he doesn't like the views of Mercersburg, specifically the idea that the church is the real development of the incarnation. He would prefer to take the expression "the body of Christ" as figurative. Believing that Christ took on human nature with its infirmities yet remained sinless, he struggled with how the church could really be

⁵⁴ Good, 285.

⁵⁵ "Acts and Proceedings of Synod," 75-78.

⁵⁶ "The Fall Session of the Classis of Philadelphia Held at the Race Street Church, Philadelphia, September 21, 1847," in *The Minutes of the Classis of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1836 to 1858 and of the "Old" Classis of Philadelphia 1820 to 1825 Compiled by Isaiah M. Rapp under the direction of The Committee on the History of the Classis of Philadelphia, 1938*," available at the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Pages 1847-4,5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1847-5.

the body of Christ and have sin. In Berg's mind, if it were really the body of Christ it must be sinless also.⁵⁸

Further he reveals his logic when he questions Harbaugh about embracing Mercersburg philosophy that makes the church "a kind of depository of the law of Christian life. If so, all who are in the church must through its ordinances, be partaker of this life." He anticipates a response of one saying that in order to partake of this life one must be a true believer and counters that such a law of life proceeds from Christ and not the church. He could not grasp the concept of the life of Christ being distinct from yet mediated through the church. The difficulty, he confessed, "I have always had with Mercersburg is, that it does not discriminate sufficiently between Christ and the church."⁵⁹

When Berg departed the German Reformed Church in 1852 the *Mercersburg Review* published an article which was later distributed as a pamphlet entitled "Some Notice of Dr. Berg's 'Farewell Words.'" It called Berg's attitude foul and divisive and accused him of appointing himself his own final authority. It names him a Moravian by birth and a Puritan by education. "For his *original* determinations in theology, his purely private and independent shapings of the unworked material of the Bible, with all due humility and respect be it spoken, we would not give a farthing or a fig."⁶⁰ A longer quote from the pamphlet summarizes the Mercersburg position well:

The obedience of faith, the habit of an actual submission to religion as a concrete supernatural fact, must go before the use of private judgment here Without that, it is the private judgment of mere blind nature, which is no better at last than miserable rationalism or infidelity. But now this obedience of faith, this sense of the mystery of godliness as a concrete living fact, is only another name for the communion of saints, and sympathy with the mind of the Holy Catholic Church. One must be in the Spirit, to receive or understand the things of the Spirit. But how can he be in the Spirit, if he be not in fellowship with the Church; if he own no supernatural mystery of godliness in the past history of the Church, if he know not what it is to be ruled or bound at all, in his theological life, by the authority of the Church, thus onward as an object of faith?⁶¹

Berg reacted against the sinfully corrupt objective force of the Medieval Roman Catholic Church. Nevin and Schaff reacted against the sinfully corrupt subjective

⁵⁸ Nevin had addressed this issue by describing the righteousness of Christ in the church as a larvae in a cocoon. The life inside would soon triumph over the shell. So the righteousness of Christ would progressively be made known and sin would be left behind. The life of Christ could really be present, just not yet known in its fullness.

⁵⁹ "Harbaugh, Henry (1817-1867). Correspondence from Berg, Joseph F. 1848-1849, 1862," contained in files at the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society, Lancaster, PA.

⁶⁰ "Some Notice of Dr. Berg's 'Farewell Words' from the *Mercersburg Review*" (Mercersburg, PA: P. A. Rice, 1852), 6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

force of American Protestantism. Their view of the church was Christocentric and for them the incarnation was central. Berg sought to build a strong Protestantism by attacking Roman Catholicism. Nevin and Schaff sought to build a strong Protestantism that included the truth that was hidden beneath the corruption of the Medieval church. Berg was a product of a subjective-oriented America, Nevin and Schaff of a German way of thinking that was friendlier toward objectivity that called on the subjective to subject itself. Schaff was vindicated at his trial, but the subjectivity of Berg, Hodge and other opponents to Mercersburg has remained firmly entrenched in American Christianity as a dominating force. Yet Schaff would likely look for the good in the present state of North American Christianity and conclude that God's sovereign guidance is at work and that good is being produced as preparation is being made toward the realization of a higher and purified form of Christianity.

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