

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 FIVE

Divided Thoughts on Union

Recently a conservative, Reformed pastor was heard to say that if John Williamson Nevin disagreed with Charles Hodge, Nevin must've been in error. He was unable to give any substantive critique of the differences between Nevin and Hodge, but since Hodge is highly regarded among establishment Reformed theologians, any detractors are naturally assumed to be something close to heretical. The heirs of Puritanism often write with terms of suspicion when speaking of either Nevin or his colleague Phillip Schaff who taught together at the seminary of the German Reformed Church in the mid-nineteenth century. The frustrating part for the reader of such articles is that often the critiques offered are not very detailed, contain misleading caricatures and demonstrate a tendency to demonize rather than engage on particular issues.

This chapter is not intended so much to vindicate Hodge or Nevin. Instead, the scope is intended to introduce the reader to some criticisms of Puritanism by the Mercersburg movement and then to consider whether a modern pastor/theologian could combine insights from both as he engages in ministry. Are they truly so opposed that one must be labeled as taboo and feared for its polluting influence?

Carl Trueman describes the effect of the church's realization of the doctrine of justification by faith in the Reformation as transforming the life of the church from focusing on the Mass and altar toward the centrality of preaching. Sacramental worship was replaced by Word-based worship. Roman Catholic sanctuary aesthetics were mostly abandoned due to the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith.¹ The Lutheran Reformation did not distance itself so radically from Roman Catholic practice as did the Reformed church. John Knox saw himself as a crusader against idolatry. Historic liturgical forms were abandoned once they were branded as idolatry and associated with governmental control over worship.

¹ Carl Trueman, "Puritan Spirituality in Context" [lecture], retrieved from www.mp3.samedia.com/media/650619641/650619641.mp3

Also, mirroring the rise of individualism in European society, the Puritan church became distanced from patristic and Medieval emphases on communal spirituality. Puritan piety fostered the mentality of a personal or private quiet time with God.²

Sinclair Ferguson explains that the Puritan movement grew out of John Knox's attempts to reform the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, throwing off the grip of bishops and archbishops in hopes that the church would be purified by the Word of God instead.³ It was a deliberate movement to facilitate spiritual growth outside of the hierarchy of the Church of England. They were reacting against the dead formality by promoting preachers who were filled with the Holy Spirit and very well able to handle the Scriptures. According to Ferguson, they explicitly rejected the view that the church is the body of Christ in the world, which they associated with Roman Catholicism.⁴ Their view of a church covenant seems to open the door to the church becoming an organization of volunteers rather than an organic manifestation of the life of Christ. Nevin sought to divert the church back to what he believed was more in line with the ecclesiology of the Reformers.

The Mystical Presence and Dr. Nevin's Theology

In *The Mystical Presence*, Nevin explained that "Christianity is grounded in the living union of the believer with the person of Christ."⁵ This invisible union is made visible for those who come in faith to partake of the Lord's Supper. He turns to Calvin to demonstrate that subsequent Reformed thought turned away from the sacramental path the magisterial reformers had plotted, developing instead into an unchurchly and rationalistic movement which pushed sacraments into the background. Nevin said that the sacramental teaching of Calvin was constructed on the belief that believers "are incorporated into his very nature, and made to subsist with him by the power of a common life." Calvin saw salvation as being "mystically inserted more and more into the person of Christ."⁶

This real participation in the living person, Jesus, is highlighted in Ephesians 5:30 where the church is said to be bone of Christ's bone and flesh of His flesh. This union is not a result of any joint participation of the believer and Jesus in Adam's nature. Instead one must participate in Christ's nature as a higher order than that of Adam.⁷ This union believers share with Christ is more than a moral union in which two parties bind themselves together in common sympathy or mutual agreement.

² Ibid.

³ Sinclair Ferguson (2009), "Puritan Reading Room" [lecture], retrieved from www.feedingonchrist.com/files/2009/03/ferguson_puritan_reading_room.mp3

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 47

⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁷ Ibid., 51.

Nevin defines union with Christ as sharing a common life with Him, similar to how all who are born into this world share the life of Adam.⁸ The Lord's Supper, claims Nevin, is more than a time to reflect and recommit or than God renewing His promises to partakers. To him, the Lord's Supper "embodies the actual presence of the grace it represents in its own constitution; and this grace is not simply the promise of God on which we are encouraged to rely, but the very life of the Lord Jesus Christ himself" who is made present by the power of the Holy Spirit.⁹

The believer's link to Christ is more than a legal union. In acknowledging that Christ served as the substitutionary representative of His people when He suffered and died, he distances himself from the type of stance on forensic justification which is a part of Puritan theology when he states, "external imputation rests at last on an inward, real unity of life, without which it could have no reason or force." Therefore, participation in the Lord's Supper is not only partaking of the fruits of the atonement or the Great High Priest's intercession, but "also in his true and proper life itself." Further, this participation in Christ is not only with His divine nature or with the Holy Spirit only, since He is Christ's representative. It is with the Word made flesh. Since deity and humanity are joined inseparably, communion with Christ is with both His deity and humanity.¹⁰ Nevin insisted that the communicant actually partakes of the substance of Christ's person.¹¹ He rejected both transubstantiation and consubstantiation. The presence of Christ is spiritual and not corporeal in the bread and cup.¹² Calvin's teaching was that Christ is engaged by faith in the Lord's Supper and not by the lips or hands.¹³

Precedent for his viewpoint was identified as he explained that the early Helvetic church believed the sacraments to have objective force, or that they exhibit what they represent, holding that there is a depth to the mystery of the Eucharist which cannot easily be put into words.¹⁴

In a section where Nevin summarizes Calvin he writes,

The Word became flesh, according to this view, for the purpose not simply of effecting a salvation that might become available for men in an outward way, but to open a fountain of life in our nature itself, that might thenceforward continue to flow over to other men, as a vivific stream, to the end of time. The flesh of Christ, then, or his humanity, forms the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 52-53.

¹⁰ Ibid., 53.

¹¹ Ibid., 54.

¹² Ibid., 55.

¹³ Ibid., 64.

¹⁴ Ibid., 62.

medium, and the only medium by which it is possible for us to be inserted into his life. To have part in him at all, we must be joined to him in the flesh; and this not by the bond of our common relationship to Adam, but by the force of a direct implantation through the Spirit, into the person of Christ himself.¹⁵

He quotes Calvin at length (Institutes IV, 17, 5) to show that partaking of Christ in the Eucharist is more than obtaining knowledge because eating and drinking are different than merely seeing the bread and the cup.

From John 1 Calvin shows that the Word is life. Now the Word has come to dwell in human nature. This brings the fountain of life close and makes it accessible. Nevin quotes Calvin thus (Institutes IV, 17, 8),

In these words ["I am the living bread" in John 6:48, 51] he teaches, not simply that he is Life, as the everlasting Word descending to us from heaven, but that in thus descending he has infused this virtue also into the flesh with which he clothed himself, in order that life might flow over to us from it continually.¹⁶

And from Institutes IV, 17, 10,

Now this sacred communication of his flesh and blood, by which Christ transfuses his life into us, just as if he penetrated our bones and marrow, he testifies and seals also in the holy supper; not by the exhibition of a vain and empty sign, but by putting forth there such an energy of his Spirit as fulfils what he promises. What is thus attested he offers and exhibits to all who approach the spiritual banquet.¹⁷

This benefit of the Lord's Supper only is accessed by believers who approach with trust and gratitude. Redemption and life and righteousness by the cross cannot be received "if we have not in the first place a true communion with Christ himself. For those benefits could never reach us if Christ did not first make himself ours."¹⁸

Nevin refers to one of Calvin's tracts which focuses on the vine and branches illustration of union with Christ wherein believers partake of sap from the root of Christ. In that place Nevin highlights Calvin's view that feeding on Christ spiritually does not mean it is imaginary since the Spirit can join two things that are separated by physical distance.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹⁶ Ibid., 65.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 66.

¹⁹ Ibid., 67-69. The name of the tract is *De vera participatione carnis et sanguinis Christi in sacra coena*.

In subsequent pages Nevin appeals to Farel, Beza, Peter Martyr, the Gallic Confession, the Old Scotch Confession, the Belgic Confession, the Second Helvetic Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism to reinforce the same points as from Calvin. If believers are incorporated into Christ's life and partake of the substance of his flesh and blood, it would only be logical that the church is Christ's body for His life presently on earth. His "substantial humanity" fills the church because of the organic unity it shares with Him as its Head.²⁰

In his consideration of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Nevin approaches differently because he sees it as different from the older confessions because it is a Puritan confession, and Puritans, he believed, were unfavorable to the objective and mystical life of the church. However, the Westminster Confession does espouse the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Despite that acknowledgement, Nevin holds it as secondary in importance to the earlier confessions and catechisms flowing from the Reformation.²¹

In reviewing the work of John Owen, Nevin concludes that the non-conformism of the low-church Puritan directed him toward an "incorporeal spiritualism."²² He summarized Owen's position as holding to a three-fold presence of Christ in the Eucharist – representation, exhibition and sealing. According to Nevin, there is found in Owen a real participation in the substance of Christ's humanity, but not to the degree it was found in Calvin and the sixteenth century church.

Nevin was distressed at what he perceived to be an anti-sacramental and anti-objective movement in his time. He cited Jonathan Edwards as saying that Christ is not present in the Lord's Supper but only by proxy or by representation of the elements. Samuel Hopkins saw the Lord's Supper as an opportunity to profess one's faith when reminded by the bread and the cup of Christ's promises. And according to Rev. John Dick, the elements of the Eucharist are good for a remembrance only. Barnes' *Notes on the Gospels* in commenting on John 6:53-56 claimed that Jesus being the living bread only referred to His life. He continued on to say that the way Jesus dwells in believers is by His Spirit and doctrine, and the way believers dwell in Christ is by partaking of His benefits. "This is my body" actually means "This represents my body."²³ The theology of New England in Nevin's day he assessed to be far different than that of the sixteenth century Reformed church. Nevin was saddened that in his day both mystery and miracle had been removed from the sacrament. He noted Dr. Dwight who made the Lord's Supper seem as common as a July Fourth celebration.²⁴ The objective force of the sacrament was disregarded in Nevin's world. The union between what was signified in the sacraments and the sign itself was dissolved.

²⁰ Ibid., 85.

²¹ Ibid., 91.

²² Ibid., 96.

²³ Ibid., 104-109.

²⁴ Ibid., 112-113.

In a footnote Nevin anticipates accusations that any sense of objective force resident in the sacraments leads automatically to popery. He defends his position by comparing the objective force in the Eucharist to a seed which objectively has life in it. The conditions must be right for it to show that life.²⁵ He quotes Owen favorably who said, "It is no empty, painted feast."

While seventeenth century Puritans may not have held as high a view of the incarnation and church as Nevin did, when the Mercersburg theologians took Puritanism to task, they were referring more to the version of New England Puritanism that existed in their own day. The New England Puritans continued to use the same language of early Reformed theologians regarding the Lord's Supper, but they applied new meanings. Again referring to Dr. Dwight, Nevin describes his position as terribly subjective, that the good produced by partaking of the Lord's Supper is inspiring proper affections for Jesus.²⁶ This is in contrast to the former robust understanding of real participation in Christ's person who is "the ground and fountain from which all these other blessings may be expected to flow."²⁷ Some of the New England Puritans saw doctrine as the source of life for the soul.²⁸

One cannot deny that the writings of seventeenth century Puritans have much power and worth. Their insights regarding Scripture are useful, so if they can be characterized as subjective, one can conclude there is a beneficial subjectivity. Nevin would not deny a beneficial subjectivity or that objectivity can become corrupt as it did in the Roman system of the Medieval period. As a product of his times, his emphasis was on confronting a subjectivism which had overrun its bounds. The earlier Puritans' writings were laced with Scripture. Nevin is by no means devoid of Scripture, but he at times appears to be presenting the Church as a major authority on which he rests, a factor that could raise suspicion in those who have been influenced by the Puritans' high regard for the Bible.

In the next section of *The Mystical Presence* Nevin reaches back to the patristic era in his evaluation of the church's treatment of the Lord's Supper. He concludes regarding the early church that "To have part truly and fully in the virtue of his atonement, it was felt that there must be a real participation also in the life of his person."²⁹ In treating the Lord's Supper he clearly rejects the mass, but he urges the reader to not answer a gross error by a gross opposite error which would strip the sacrament of all mystery and objective force. He labors to prove that the idea of objective force in the sacraments was not absent in the early church. Clearly, he saw little in common between the New England Puritans of his own day and the early church in the matters under consideration here.

²⁵ Ibid., 114.

²⁶ Ibid., 115.

²⁷ Ibid., 116.

²⁸ Ibid., 117.

²⁹ Ibid., 123.

He accused the New England Puritans of engaging in rationalism. He saw the rationalism of the Socinians and Arminians as developing out of Protestantism's revolt against the oppressive objectivism of the Roman Catholic Church which for so long had suppressed rightful subjectivism. Rome, he said, "sacrificed the rights of the individual to the authority of the general."³⁰ In Nevin's day he perceived subjectivism to be wrongly oppressing objectivism. This subjectivism considered itself to be too spiritual to regard outward forms favorably. Thus sacraments were retained, but without power and accomplishing only the awakening of feelings of devotion.³¹

Here Nevin also addressed sectarianism or a schismatic spirit which makes religion always personal and experiential to the point that it tends toward "restless excitement and action," even becoming wild and fanatical. Certainly such a brand of spirituality has little use for outward forms and order in the church and pursues a supreme subjectivity.³² "Spirit" is pitted against form. The inward is preferred above the outward.

Both rationalism and a schismatic spirit claim to start with the Bible, and sectarianism often ends up being driven by some sense of an inner light. Both subject the Bible to private interpretation. Nevin explained, "Hyper-spiritualism is ever fleshly pseudo-spiritualism; that is sure to fall back sooner or later impotent and self-exhausted, into the low element from which it has vainly pretended to make its escape." "The inward light of the one, and the light of reason as held by the other, come to the same thing at last."³³ Rationalism defrauds Christianity of being a supernatural life, reducing it to doctrine only.³⁴

Even though Nevin places a great deal of confidence in the Church as an objective presence of the life of Christ as a safeguard against rationalistic and sectarian spirituality and misuse of the Bible, he acknowledges that the early church and the Reformers were far from perfect. Yet he questions whether those with a subjective, low view of the church could be correct, for that would imply that the church had been in darkness for fifteen hundred years.³⁵

Nevin believed that if Calvin had used language highlighting the organic nature of Christ's human life that much confusion could have been averted as there would have been less disputing over the idea of local, material contact with Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist. He also believed that Calvin fell short in His treatment of Christ as a single life, choosing instead to emphasize distinctions and division between the two natures. Nevin argued that neither of the natures of

³⁰ Ibid., 133.

³¹ Ibid., 134.

³² Ibid., 139.

³³ Ibid., 140.

³⁴ Ibid., 145.

³⁵ Ibid.

Christ acts independently without touching or affecting the other. In addition, he also held that Calvin would have benefited from distinguishing between “the individual personal life of Christ, and the same life in a generic view.”³⁶

In explaining this idea of a generic life, Nevin closely associates the individual life and the generic. He uses an acorn as an example. If it becomes a tree and grows for a hundred years, it has a single existence. Yet the acorn which became the tree also possessed a “force of life that is capable of reaching far beyond all such individual limits” because it could potentially produce thousands of acorns, each having the potential of an individual existence of a tree. Thus the life of the whole forest of oak trees is bound together inwardly and organically.³⁷

While reading the above, one may think of Isaiah calling Christ the “everlasting Father” or Isaiah 53 speaking of the seed of the Suffering Servant. Nevin would have seen Adam similarly. He was an individual, but also the head of the human race. His individual personality was limited to himself. “But a whole world of like separate personalities lay involved in his life, at the same time, as a generic principle or root.”³⁸ Where covenant theology explains the benefit of Christ carrying over into His people in terms primarily of decrees, Nevin instead stresses an organic union while not denying the covenants. To a significant degree, the difference between the two schools of thought is rooted in differing emphases on the same substance of theology as opposed to being completely opposing theologies.

A statement in this section about organic union causes one to think again of Ephesians 5:30 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 where the Apostle Paul speaks of believers and Jesus forming one mystical body. The statement is this, “And all these in a deep sense, form at last but one and the same life. Adam lives in his posterity, as truly as he has ever lived in his own person. They participate in his whole nature, soul and body, and are truly bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.”³⁹ Likewise Christ manifests in Nevin’s view both an individual and a generic life. In this way there can be a real communication of His life to His people. Christ is the true Man in a higher sense than Adam. He is the “true idea of humanity.” As Nevin presents this, he appeals to the Scriptures as the authoritative test of truth to prove his thesis correct. Referencing Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 2:24, he draws from there the idea that as Eve was formed from Adam so that she might be a part of him, so the church is formed from Christ, “that we may be true members of Christ, by the communication of his substance, [and] coalesce with him into one body.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Ibid., 149, 151.

³⁷ Ibid., 152

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 218.

Adam's fall was the fall of the whole human race, not just because by decree he was assigned to be its representative, but because organically it was "comprehended in his person." This makes the ruin of humanity organic by nature.⁴¹ All participate in spiritually impotent, fallen nature because all participate in Adam's life.

The imputation of Adam's sin then is not an external transfer of guilt but is imputed because all are born into Adam's nature and into his real guilt since all are organically related to him. Yet at the same time, not a particle of Adam's body enters ours, even as we partake of his life. The paradigm then will carry over for Nevin's understanding of our participation in Christ as depicted in the Lord's Supper.

A natural result of such logic is that the incarnation plays a major, central role in the accomplishing of salvation, far more central than in the corpus of Puritan writings. Nevin insists that by the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures Adam's fallen humanity "was exalted again to a new and imperishable divine life."⁴² It was joined in an inner way with the divine nature in the Living Word who is the fountain of all created life. "The whole world, in its deepest sense, is longing and striving after a union with God."⁴³ Only the divine-human Christ is able to satisfy this longing for union with the Creator. The union Nevin described was not pantheism where individuality is lost and swallowed up by the general. However, the only way individuality can reach its highest stage of consciousness and personality depends on the work of the divine-human Christ.⁴⁴ "This mystical union stands related to the hypostatical union as life to essence. The hypostatical union implies union of essence."⁴⁵

As in places Nevin wishes that Calvin had been clearer, one might desire greater clarity from Nevin when he defines the exact nature of Christ's humanity. He claims that Jesus had to assume fallen humanity to take it from the depths of sorrow and pain to triumph "in the power of his own imperishable life."⁴⁶ There is no evidence that Nevin holds anything less than the absolute sinless perfection of Christ. In fact, he says later that Jesus was made in all respects like us but was without sin (Hebrews 4:15; 5:2-7). But He was made in the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:3), that is, subject to infirmity and death.⁴⁷ So he seems to be saying that Christ was affected by humanity's guilt not just at the cross but throughout His life, "for it was no external relation simply, that he sustained to this

⁴¹ Ibid., 155.

⁴² Ibid., 156.

⁴³ William H. Erb, ed. and comp., *Dr. Nevin's Theology* (Reading, PA: I. M. Beaver, 1913), 131.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 291.

⁴⁶ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 156.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 209.

last. He was himself the race. Humanity dwelt in his person as the second Adam, under a higher form than ever it carried in the first.”⁴⁸

Since the Logos assumed humanity, suffering became a necessity as the only way the new life could conquer the law of sin and death that was operative in the human race. The atonement then was the victory of Christ over sin and hell and is the only medium of salvation for humans. Our author takes a moment here to downplay the federal idea of imputation as fiction. The imputation of Adam’s sin was “not a foreign evil arbitrarily set over to our account. It is immanent to our nature itself. Just so here. The atonement as a foreign work, could not be made to reach us in the way of a true salvation. Only as it may be considered immanent in our nature itself, can it be imputed to us as ours, and so become available in us for its own ends.” “When Christ died and rose, humanity died and rose at the same time in his person; not figuratively, but truly; just as it had fallen before in the person of Adam.”⁴⁹ Both the passive and active obedience of Christ are not arbitrarily transferred over to believers in the covenant of grace but only “by a living communication with Christ, so that it is immanent in us.”⁵⁰ The covenant of grace began in Paradise and unfolded through the Old Testament until the incarnation. Jesus served as Mediator under that covenant, of which the atonement was a necessary part of His work. The Mediator also serves as representative of the general life. The Old Testament revealed that the Mediator would be the seed of a woman and that He would have a human life with divine power and so at the same time transcended the normal human life.⁵¹

For Nevin, Christianity then is a new life, not merely a doctrine for the mind to embrace or an event to be remembered as a motivational example. The incarnation “is the supernatural linking itself to the onward flow of the world’s life, and becoming thenceforward itself the ground and principle of the entire organism”⁵² This new life is a true human life because the Word was made flesh. Jesus was a man more perfectly than Adam, but He did not start a parallel race to Adam’s. Instead He raised Adam’s race to a higher character with new meaning and power because it is now in union with the divine nature.⁵³ The believer’s bond with Christ is deeper and more intimate than the initial bond with Adam.

Nevin points out that Adam in his original condition was not immortal. As evidence he offers the existence of the tree of life. “Immortality seems to require not simply a union of the creature with God, as is implied in his being created in the image of God, but a union with the life of God accomplished by union with the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 156-157.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 157.

⁵⁰ Erb, 223.

⁵¹ Ibid., 228-230, 235, 239.

⁵² Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 157-158.

⁵³ Ibid., 158.

eternal Word.”⁵⁴ Adam failed the test of his probationary period and was excluded from immortality when he was excluded from the tree of life which could only confer life on Adam the righteous and not on Adam the sinner. He sees it as sacramental where under the right condition it actually conveys what it signifies.

In dealing with Adam’s sin, Nevin denies a covenant of works wherein God and man entered into a formal contract because the term covenant is never applied to this initial relationship in the Bible.⁵⁵ He interacts briefly with the work of Herman Witsius on the covenant. It seems Nevin’s goal is to avoid an idea of legal imputation which emphasizes a legal transfer of righteousness apart from organic participation in the life of Christ. He blames this alleged divorce of legal imputation and organic participation in the life of Christ on the Puritan development of multiple covenants. Yet he acknowledges cautiously the major elements of the covenant of works while refusing to recognize it as a covenant because it makes both the relationship between Adam and his people and Christ and His people to be “abstract and mechanical.”⁵⁶ Adam, Nevin maintains, was both the legal and physical head of the human race during the probationary period. “The legal and physical imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity is organic, the legal resting on the physical fact.”⁵⁷ He refutes the Pelagians and Socinians by acknowledging Adam’s federal headship, for those groups claimed that each person is responsible for self and refuse to acknowledge the present fallen condition of an individual as resulting from any legal or moral relation to Adam. They would acknowledge a physical relation to him as a cause of the poor conditions in the world.⁵⁸ Nevin neither wanted to overemphasize the physical nor the legal aspect of union with Adam, saying “We must hold both.” He is on record as holding to total depravity as a result of Adam’s fall.⁵⁹ And he believed that had Adam by obedience passed the test of the probationary period he would have been transformed by a natural process into a higher order. Since he failed, death would rule unless the Gospel had appeared.⁶⁰

When the Scriptures say that “by one man’s disobedience the many were constituted sinners, this refers to more than a legal status. It is a real constitution which flows together with imputation.”⁶¹

⁵⁴ Erb, 119-120.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 203.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 204.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 205.

⁵⁹ Nevin’s theology is lacking in development at this point in that he states that the geological record shows death in the world long before the fall. This creates confusion as to how Adam’s sin unleashed the poor conditions of which he speaks. (Page 208.) He maintains that natural death is a result of spiritual death. (Page 211) His position changed over the course of his life, so the reader may want to explore this point further.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 208-209.

⁶¹ Ibid., 218.

Nevin held that the covenant of works continues to exist as a broken covenant. That means its claims continue in force because of the penalty it continues to enforce. It is abolished in the sense that it no longer promises life.⁶²

Regeneration is insertion into Christ. Sanctification is new life claiming greater influence in various parts of one's being. All this stems from mystical union with Christ's humanity. He identified three types of union with God. First is legal which is external; second is moral which is characterized by sympathy; and third is mystical which has to do with "oneness of life like that which pervades the members of the same body."⁶³ The three are closely related, but the mystical is the basis for the other two. Nevin cautions that to speak of union with the Logos apart from His humanity would be to exalt humans to His level. It would require some level of replication of the hypostatical union in every believer.⁶⁴ Lest anything up to this point seem to tend toward universalism, Nevin says that Christ's life is only apprehended by faith.⁶⁵ Christ's words to Nicodemus in John 3:6 show that one's entire self must be changed and not merely improved. A new life must be introduced.⁶⁶

"All life, in the case of man," Nevin said, "is actualized, and can be actualized, only in the way of process, of gradual historical development."⁶⁷ For this reason Nevin preferred a systematic discipleship program of catechesis using the Heidelberg Catechism rather than pushing for a sudden conversion through antics such as Finney's Anxious Bench which was employed with the assumption that one could take measures to prepare for and induce regeneration. One system sought to develop organically the life of Christ mediated through the church, while the other stressed a mechanical, personal event. Besides catechesis, Nevin would have included pastoral visitation and other Christian education in his formula for developing Christ's life through the church.

Nevin's concept of organic union sheds a new light on the Westminster Shorter Catechism when *The Mystical Presence* quotes, "A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed and applied to believers."⁶⁸ Invisible grace accompanies sacraments. Grace is objectively present but will only be applied if the condition of faith exists. However, faith does not give the sacrament its force. The sign and what it signifies are mysteriously bound together. The exalted Christ in heaven is communicated to faithful participants in Holy Communion. He quotes John Owen as follows,

⁶² Ibid., 216.

⁶³ Ibid., 291.

⁶⁴ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 160.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁶⁶ Erb, 219.

⁶⁷ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 166.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 168.

This is the greatest mystery of all the practicals of our Christian religion, a way of receiving Christ by eating and drinking, something peculiar, that is not in the hearing of the word nor in any other part of divine worship whatsoever; a peculiar participation of Christ, a peculiar way of faith towards Christ.⁶⁹

In treating justification Nevin holds that it rests on the objective merit of Christ who made propitiation by His blood. He writes,

But this justification, to become ours in fact, must insert us into Christ's life. It reaches us from abroad, the 'act of God's free grace;' but as God's act; it is necessarily more than a declaration or form of thought. It makes us to be in fact, what it accounts us to be, in Christ. The ground of our justification is a righteousness that was foreign to us before, but is now made to lodge itself in the inmost constitution of our being. A real life-union with Christ, powerfully wrought in our souls by the Holy Ghost, is the only basis, on which there can be any true imputation to us of what he has done and suffered on our behalf.⁷⁰

Nevin understands forensic justification to be the imputation of Adam's guilt to his descendants and likewise the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers in the new covenant. It is the ground of sanctification.⁷¹ What is imputed to a person is counted as truly his as if he had accomplished it himself. It is an act of God based on the work of Christ which changes one's standing before God but not his character. Accompanying imputation of righteousness is regeneration by the Holy Spirit which begins the process of sanctification and the transformation of one's life into the image of Christ. But he is troubled with the question of how something can be imputed to a person which in reality does not belong to him. (This is a question Roman Catholics have asked as did the Remonstrants of Holland.)

Quoting Nevin, "The judgment of God must be according to truth. He cannot reckon to any one an attribute or quality, which does not belong to him in fact. He cannot declare him to be in a relation or state, which is not actually his own, but the position merely of another."⁷² He is arguing not against imputation in justification but that justification is rooted in the union of a shared life with Christ. "All true Christianity," he says, "whatever their theory with regard to the point may be, feel that their union with Christ is something far more than this, and that their property in the benefits of his death and resurrection rests upon a basis infinitely more sure and solid."⁷³ But should a doctrine be founded on a collective feeling or on Scripture?

⁶⁹ Ibid., 172.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 170.

⁷¹ Erb, 295.

⁷² Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 178.

⁷³ Ibid., 179.

Nevin defends his position by saying that he is not out to discard imputation because it defeats the Pelagians and forms the whole structure of Christianity. What he wishes to do is to connect it more tightly with a real participation in Christ. Again he looks back to humanity's organic union with Adam and how the effects of his fall were communicated to us. He says, "The Bible knows nothing of a simply outward imputation, by which something is reckoned to a man that does not belong to him in fact. The fall of Adam is adjudged to be the fall of his posterity, because it was so actually. The union in law here is a union in life." Then he asks, "May an attribute or quality be made to extend in a real way, beyond the substance to which it is attached and in which only it can have any real existence? The moral relations of Adam, and his moral character too, are made over to us at the same time. Our participation in the actual righteousness of his life, forms the ground of our participation in his guilt and liability to punishment."⁷⁴ For support he refers in a footnote to the Westminster Catechism's declaration that the descendants of Adam sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression. His understanding of this is that because of humanity's organic union with Adam, all share "a fallen life in the first place, and on the ground of this only, imputed guilt and condemnation."⁷⁵ And so,

We are justified freely by God, on the ground of what Christ has done and suffered in our room and stead. His righteousness is imputed to us, set over to our account, regarded as our own. But here again the relation in law, supposes and shows a corresponding relation in life. The forensic declaration by which the sinner is pronounced free from guilt, is like that word in the beginning when God said, Let there be light, and light was. It not only proclaims him righteous for Christ's sake, but sets the righteousness of Christ in him as a part of his own life. And in doing this, it sets the very life of Christ in him, in the same way.⁷⁶

What one would likely want to know next is when union then begins. Is it before justification? At justification? At one point he indicates it happens simultaneously.⁷⁷ Can a person exercise faith if not already in union with Christ? Lectures given in 1851 reveal Nevin's position that justification must occur before faith or any realization of union with Christ.⁷⁸

Christ's righteousness, Nevin declares, cannot be separated from His life. In fact, he asserts that a legal transfer of righteousness apart from being inserted into the life of Christ is unbiblical. He presented regeneration as spawning justification.⁷⁹ Justification and sharing the life of Christ are inseparable.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., footnote.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 180.

⁷⁷ Erb, 296.

⁷⁸ Evans, 177.

⁷⁹ Erb, 296.

According to Nevin, “Christ is in the believer and the believer is in Christ; not by a moral relationship simply, and not by a legal connection only; but by the bond of a common life.”⁸⁰ Anything less than that, claims Nevin, is related to rationalism. While he includes in justification “an investiture of positive righteousness” as something more than an abstract legal declaration, he denies that justification frees from the power of sin. So while justification and sanctification are inseparable because both are rooted in union with Christ’s life, they are distinct. Of justification he said, “This imputation is the infusion of the sinner with the life of Christ and the favor of God.” As for sanctification, “It is not imputed externally, but grows out of the life of Christ, which becomes the life of the believer.”⁸¹

As for more precise details on the order of the elements of salvation, Nevin is clear that Christ must apprehend a person before a person can apprehend Him. He understood the Bible to teach that faith is a fruit of the Spirit, and its presence then indicates that one is already justified. The objective must precede the subjective. Justification may take time to manifest itself in the life of one who was baptized as an infant. Failure to manifest faith later in life does not deny the objective grace in baptism. The objective must become subjective in order for salvation to be realized. Again, the church is the vehicle for bringing objective grace near to people, independent of their faith.⁸² He accuses sectarians who hold a low view of the church of elevating faith to the point that they end up trusting and glorying in their own works.⁸³ Reminiscent of some statements from Thomas Brooks, Nevin’s perspective on assurance is that one can be justified and not have the assurance that such is the case. He continues, “Faith is not the principle of our righteousness” because it is not the principle from which righteousness originates. Instead, it is the condition which is necessary for righteousness to develop. Christ alone is the principle of righteousness.⁸⁴

Some would diminish union with Christ by making it union with the Spirit who works to conform partakers to Christ’s image. That is different from Christ dwelling in a person by His Spirit. There is a difference between new life that springs from Christ and is mediated by the Spirit and Christ dwelling in His people only by means of a proxy or representative, namely the Holy Spirit.⁸⁵ Often those who want to constitute union with Christ as being with His Spirit speak of union with the Logos only and not with Christ’s humanity. But how can Christ be divided?⁸⁶

The opponents Nevin intends to counter with his arguments in this section he engages with a question which is, How did the grace of the New Testament differ

⁸⁰ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 181.

⁸¹ Erb, 296-297.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 298-300.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 305.

⁸⁵ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 182.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

from that of the Old Testament? Is there merely a fuller revelation, new facts and more plentiful privileges? Is the Holy Spirit simply given more liberally in the New Testament? Nevin expects his opponents to answer in the affirmative. He then counters that the incarnation is the source of the difference between the two testaments. In the New Testament the Spirit is “the medium of a new spiritual creation.”⁸⁷ It is not that the believer has union only with the Spirit as if the life of God is poured directly into the soul. That would be another incarnation Nevin reasons. Such would be “an absolute creation out of nothing; a higher order of existence, including no organic, historical connection whatever with any law of life already at hand.”⁸⁸ Every believer would then be a new creation but not a new creation in Christ Jesus. Instead, the Holy Spirit creates in us “the very life of Jesus himself, organically continued in this way over into our persons.”⁸⁹ “Paul seems at times almost to lose sight of the distinction between Christ and the Christian, in the overwhelming sense he has of their oneness.”⁹⁰ Believers are crucified, dead and buried with Him, and now have risen with Him to a new and higher life (Romans 6:3-11; 7:4; 8:11; Galatians 2:20; Philippians 3:9-12; Colossians 2:12; 3:1-4).

While the latter part of the book examines numerous Scriptures to demonstrate the validity of its author’s argument, he says that the doctrines of Christ’s person, infant baptism, the Trinity, the transition of worship from the seventh day of the week to the first, all developed by drawing from the whole of Scripture. That same method was what he intended to employ here in his proofs.⁹¹ He has a way of making statements that set modern Reformed theologians on edge. For example, concerning the Scriptures he says, “The conception that the Bible was to be a rule by which all things were to be measured is false.” That sentence without qualification would be enough to cause many to turn away from him. But he was referring to the fact that the Apostles could not address every situation one might face today. For example, Paul’s epistles do not specifically address all possible situations that will ever face the church. Living Christianity acknowledges Christ’s continuing prophetic ministry revealed in the Bible which manifests itself in the church’s developing interpretations over centuries.⁹² Says Nevin, “The Church is the body of Christ, and the members are the participants of His life, and consequently of His office.”⁹³ He labored hard to restore a high view of the church in his own day, and his goal is a fitting one for the present as well.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 184.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 185.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 219.

⁹¹ Ibid., 231.

⁹² Ibid., 252. In these categories he would place topics previously mentioned such as infant baptism, worship on the first day of the week, etc., for a verse commanding either is not found in Scripture.

⁹³ Ibid., 280.

Regarding election, Nevin again seems to have as his priority a desire to protect the principle of organic union while discrediting the idea of an outward decree as the basis for salvation. So as with the covenant of works, while he claims to reject it,⁹⁴ he also seems to at least partially embrace it.⁹⁵ Christ's sacrifice, Nevin teaches, has the potential to save the whole world, but is active only for His people. There is cloudiness for the reader which may be due to the fact that his style was that of an intuitive, thematic thinker rather than systematic.⁹⁶ It may help to understand that Nevin, building on his understanding of the early church, was not so focused on individual conversions but on participation in the life of Christ through the church which mediates it through the sacraments which have a living character and carry in them actual force of the things they represent – remission of sins in baptism and communication of the divine life in the Lord's Supper.⁹⁷ He argued that just because the Roman Catholic church departed into error at this point, that the truly catholic orthodoxy regarding the sacraments should not then be discarded as a response. Further, while he believed baptism places one in relation to objective grace, he would not claim a guaranteed conversion. Baptism only laid the groundwork subjectively for it.⁹⁸ It did not automatically initiate regeneration but placed the subject in covenant relation to God which position is in itself no guarantee of salvation.⁹⁹ Regeneration in Nevin's mind is introducing the divine into the natural order which new life can be nurtured by Word and sacrament.¹⁰⁰

One who is familiar with the Puritans will begin to sense between their theology and practice and Nevin's theology and practice a tension between the promotion of the authority of the church and those who see that as at odds with adherence to the supreme authority of Scripture. Both can veer into dangerous territory by maintaining their position in an extreme way. Perhaps the two could well complement and safeguard each other. Nevin emphasized sacraments as priority, the Puritans the Word. Nevin emphasized the objective nature of the church as key to union with Christ, the Puritans subjective, individual experience. Neither was wholly devoid of the other's position. The Puritans participated in the sacraments. Nevin spoke of the Spirit working through the Word. In fact, he said that the sacraments have no power if separated from the Spirit just as the Word has no power apart from the Spirit.¹⁰¹ Lest anyone think Nevin did not have a high regard for the Word, understand that he saw the Word incarnate and the

⁹⁴ Ibid., 262.

⁹⁵ Specifically, he rejects limited atonement because he deems it to be the result of abstract thinking as opposed to an organic unity of Christ with all of humanity. Yet he denies universalism and upholds the conditions of faith and repentance for partaking of Christ's life and its benefits such as the propitiation He accomplished by His death.

⁹⁶ Evans, 158.

⁹⁷ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 263.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 284.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 288.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety Versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology*, Studies in Religion and Culture, American Religion Series IV (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932), 106.

¹⁰¹ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 285.

spoken Word as closely related. “The Word is quick and powerful as far as it carries the life of Christ. The life of Christ mediates through the Word.”¹⁰² Yet his strong emphasis on the sacraments yielded a de-emphasis on preaching. His incarnational theology subjugated the written Word to the incarnate Word.¹⁰³ In this point, he failed to reflect the degree of Calvin’s emphasis on the Word.

He emphasized the need for faith but did not see it as either the ground or source of redemption as that would be Pelagianism. For all his emphasis on the life of Christ partaken of through the church, he also referred to those who had come under a degree of the Spirit’s influence but were never converted and proven to have been elect.¹⁰⁴ So he did speak of election and of individual conversion. He saw conversion as a process that grew out of the divine work of regeneration in which man is completely passive. Similar to the Puritan Herman Witsius, Nevin stated that regeneration could long precede conversion, perhaps even occurring in the womb or in infancy but not at that time manifesting itself, perhaps developing later through catechizing by the church.¹⁰⁵ Regeneration and conversion include illumination of the mind and renovation of the will.¹⁰⁶ Nevin and the Puritans lived in different worlds, perceiving different threats to the health of the church, and hailed from different national backgrounds.

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¹⁰² Ibid., 287.

¹⁰³ Evans, 177.

¹⁰⁴ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 288.

¹⁰⁵ Haroutunian, 97.

¹⁰⁶ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 289-290.