

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 NINE (Cont.)

John Williamson Nevin's Approach to Scripture

Nevin's hermeneutical approach to Scripture is rooted in the incarnation, in the bringing together of the divine and the human. He contrasted it to the grammatical-historical method of his day which he indicated lacked a transcendental element. His "primary concern was not to allow the collapse of faith into the merely human."¹ The fear was that Christian religion would be reduced to ethical thought and that the supernatural would be assumed to not reside in the text itself but to be imparted separately by way of a subjective illumination.² Throughout his career he combatted runaway subjectivism and sought to restore a healthy objectivism to the church.

William DiPuccio describes Nevin's transcendental approach as attempting to avoid the pitfalls of a hermeneutical system resting on human experience. "In Nevin's view, Christianity is not a 'long search' for meaningful existence, but a true *incarnation* of the divine in human life, thought, and language."³ Since Jesus is the Light of the world and brings uncreated radiance, He supplies light to interpret human experience. Human experience is a dubious tool to use in attempting to understand God. How could one acknowledge Jesus as the Light of the world and at the same time rely on the light of personal experience to find Him?

Behind Nevin's approach was German thought which challenged the Common Sense Realism so popular in his day. The Romantic theology of Schleiermacher and Augustus Neander, the mediating theology of Karl Ullman, Isaac Dorner, Karl Liebner, and Richard Rothe, and the idealism of Schelling, Hegel and

¹ Charles Mabee, "Editor's Preface." *The Interior Sense of Scripture: The Sacred Hermeneutics of John W. Nevin* by William DiPuccio. Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 14 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), viii.

² William DiPuccio, *The Interior Sense of Scripture: The Sacred Hermeneutics of John W. Nevin*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 14 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 97.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, together sought to wed Protestantism with ancient Catholicism.⁴ But the mention of certain names from that list served to raise concerns that Nevin's theology was flawed because too closely associated with certain philosophies which veered off course from orthodoxy. Yet Nevin's writings bear evidence that he only critically embraced such thinkers as influenced him.⁵ He held to the orthodox creeds without redefining key terms or somehow fudging on non-negotiable fundamentals of Christianity. He and his colleague Philip Schaff adopted a hermeneutical lens of Biblical exegesis consisting of apostolic tradition as summarized in the Apostles' Creed.⁶ This grew out of their use of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Often he made it his mission to prove that the very persons who accused him of such error were out of step with historic Christianity. Opponents such as the Princeton theologian Charles Hodge used guilt-by-association tactics to discredit him as if any mention of Schleiermacher, Hegel, Schelling or Coleridge automatically branded him erroneous.

Nevin did not target in his writings the confessionalism of Presbyterianism. Nor did he frequently attack Transcendentalism or Catholicism because he appreciated their mysticism, idealism and high church theology. But he did take issue with the nominalism of Charles Hodge. Hodge's writings linked the Common Sense worldview as a natural associate of the American way of life, relying heavily on the senses and promoting utility and practicality. The resulting danger could be materialism, religious skepticism or individualism that could destroy both church and society.⁷

Could the Puritan desire to establish orthodox knowledge be preserved well without the incarnation emphasis that Mercersburg represented? Both sides sought objective truth. Both acknowledged the inerrancy of Scripture. However, if one could imagine a Puritan drawing of Scripture in relation to God, it might somehow emphasize its distinction from God, inviting Enlightenment-style dissection of those Scriptures to unpack from them every rule and doctrine possible. On the other hand, if one could imagine a portrait by Nevin depicting God and Scripture, the two would be much more closely related which would lead the would-be interpreter to search for a hermeneutic which would include all of the grammatical-historical elements of the Puritan camp, but would not adopt solely a scientific methodology since one is dealing with a Person and not only a document. Nevin said that regeneration does not occur without a scientific or analytical grasp of instruction and reflection, so he was not against all such methodology.⁸

⁴ DiPuccio, 5.

⁵ Ibid., 62.

⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁷ Ibid., 7-8.

⁸ John Williamson Nevin, "Christ the Inspiration of His Own Word," *The Reformed Quarterly Review*, vol. 29 (January 1882): 11.

What he took to task was the reductionistic assumptions that often accompanied grammatical-historical exegesis, because he believed they became so focused on linguistic signs that they separated them from spiritual realities. In other words, he feared a process that would make language an end in itself, thus mediating some level of understanding but not Christ's true presence.⁹ Further, such a method would make natural intelligence rather than faith the essential qualification for exegesis. Divine light is needed in order to grasp the Scriptures (John 1:4; Psalm 36:9). In other words, the Divine Humanity of Christ provides the only possibility for grasping truth. Natural man cannot find a means to elevate himself to communion with the divine. Jesus explained to Nicodemus that the divine must descend down and draw the natural up into the sphere of the supernatural (John 3:13).¹⁰ He quotes with grand approval the Westminster Confession of Faith's article dealing with inspiration of Scripture as it beautifully explains how understanding of revelation is wholly dependent on divine activity.¹¹ He was particularly pleased at how the wording confronted the rationalism of his own day, for no human force can make the Scriptures intelligible or impactful on the mind.

Commenting on post-Reformation hermeneutical development, he observed that many believed they had developed a maturity that superseded the time periods of Jewish, Patristic and Medieval hermeneutics. This troubled him because while he acknowledged that those eras abounded in instances of arbitrary license in interpretation as well as violation of grammatical principles and logic and common sense, they possessed a recognition of the "infinite supernatural in the oracles of God,"¹² which stood in stark contrast to the rationalism rampant in Nevin's world. It was a rationalism that established reason as the judge as to whether revelation is correct and worthy to be followed. The problem stemmed from, he believed, a concept of inspiration which states "that we have . . . in some way, an outward communication of the mind and will of God made to us through holy men of God, in the forms of ordinary human thought and human speech." Thus God would be viewed as condescending to the "plane of our common natural life,"¹³ as if the whole process were quite reasonable to the extent that if one merely possessed proper credentials and evidences, it would be perfectly logical to conclude the words or message were divine. Thus natural reason can employ the apparatus of criticism, history and grammar to verify the message, similar to how any other literary work might be analyzed.¹⁴ His point is that natural light must not be trusted to lead the way. Supernatural or spiritual light is needed to open the true sense of Scripture.

⁹ Dipuccio, 93-94.

¹⁰ "Christ the Inspiration of His Own Word, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39f.

¹² John Williamson Nevin, "Sacred Hermeneutics," *The Mercersburg Review*, vol. 25 (January 1878): 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

Nevin claimed that a divine revelation given by dictation to the sphere of the natural is not strictly divine revelation any longer. "The Bible in that view can be no more at best than a conveyance or translation of the divine over into the forms of ordinary human thought and speech, which in the nature of the case can bear no sort of proportion to the measure of the divine itself."¹⁵ After all, Isaiah 55:8-11 reveals that God's thoughts are immeasurably higher than human thoughts.

Instead, Nevin prefers to recognize the Bible as "the life of the Lord, streaming forth continually from its own everlasting fountain in himself."¹⁶ The natural world was made to be a reflection of the things in the spiritual world, so care must be exercised to refrain from subordinating the supernatural to the scrutiny of the natural in the field of hermeneutics.¹⁷

In the end, Nevin would sooner identify with Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Ambrose and Augustine, who interpreted (sometimes allegorically) while recognizing the interior divine constitution of Scripture, than adopt the rationalistic philosophy of his own day which devised methods to supposedly make the Bible accessible to natural man.¹⁸ He identified with Witsius, Cocceius and Vitranga who underscored Christ as the key to understanding the Old Testament.

His thinking revealed a belief that the Scriptures claim to be the mind and voice of God which from their infinitude enter finite forms and import into them a new, divine significance which cannot be mechanically captured solely by a study of the natural meaning of the words used. Holy Scripture then is the very presence of the divine.¹⁹ Thus Scripture is not a witness to the Gospel; it "is itself the very presence of the Gospel," not as theory or notion but as life and power. "The testimony of Jesus Christ in such living view, is in the Bible just as the soul of a man is in his body."²⁰ To say that some parts of the Bible are Messianic and some not would be for Nevin like saying some parts of the body are animated by the soul and others not. True interpretation of the Bible comes from its own interior Spirit and not the exterior letter. Only the Spirit of God can make known the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:11-14).

Reflecting on René Descartes, Nevin considered the dualism between mind and matter, between God and the world. He recognized dualism as having become prevalent in American theology and in revivalistic practices because supported by Scottish Common Sense Realism which is a form of empiricism. Nevin confronted this dualism with a philosophy of organic unity of mind and matter,

¹⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹⁶ Ibid., 20.

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., 36.

¹⁹ Ibid., 22-23.

²⁰ Ibid., 24.

God and creation, while not confusing the distinct identity of each.²¹ Descartes had been unable to reconcile universals with the experience of space and time.

The rationalism that grew out of pietism drew heat from Nevin. Yet he sympathized with pietism, taking aim only at its one-sided subjectivity.

To begin to grasp Nevin's viewpoint and to understand the various observations of his objections and affinities, one must note his teaching of universal ideas. General concepts like "humanity," "tree," "beauty," "justice," etc., must exist or human knowledge could not, because without them human minds could not unite the many pieces of personal experience into an intelligible whole. He appreciated Platonist thinkers such as the Puritan John Howe of England (1630-1705) and Archbishop Robert Leighton (1611-1684). The question is then raised whether such universal ideas are "objective and independent of individual minds" or "subjective products of human thought." In other words, "Are they merely generalized descriptions of things, built up and collated from observations of actual phenomena, or the source and cause of all such phenomena, actual and potential?"²²

The relationship between the universal ideal and the actual which is finite Nevin sought to define. Nevin generally sided with realism versus nominalism. DiPuccio includes this definition for realism: "universal ideas are objective and ontological realities rather than creatures of the mind." "These ideas constitute the essence or nature of individuals and natural laws." "Universal ideas, therefore, are the foundation of all knowledge."²³

DiPuccio explains that the realism Nevin espoused was an ontological realism which is a realism of natures in which objects in time and space have an ideal essence. The Common Sense Realism he opposed was an epistemological realism of things "which asserts that the only objects of experience are concrete and individual."²⁴ Thus Nevin stood opposed to nominalism that was associated with the empirical tradition.

The tenets of nominalism are as follows: "only individual things are real"; "since every individual is unique, there can be no common nature or essence among them"; therefore, "the common names used to designate groups of individuals according to similar attributes are merely subjective abstractions."²⁵ Nominalists derive these principles from common sense experience. They defend a world in which each item experienced exists individually and not in a world of universals.

²¹ DiPuccio., 9.

²² Ibid., 10.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 10-11, footnote.

²⁵ Ibid., 11.

Should “person” or “life,” especially with reference to Christ, be considered as “an aggregate of individual qualities?” That would be nominalism which assigns labels to describe families of similar properties. Or should it be understood as a hypostatic reality? That would be realism which deals in “ontological realities from which individual properties and attributes flow.”²⁶ Thus nominalist terms are descriptive of observations and the product of inductive research. Realism thinks in terms of causation as reality shapes nature. DiPuccio wrote, “Through induction, collation, and comparison, Old School Presbyterian theologians attempted to scale the invisible with the ladder of empiricism.”²⁷

John Locke (1632-1704) laid the foundation for American nominalism. He distinguished between real essence and nominal essence, delineating nominal essence as the way of defining necessary qualities of something, that is, without those qualities, the thing would have to be classified as something else.

He defined real essence as “that constitution of the parts of matter, on which these qualities and their union depend,” and he held that real essence cannot be known.²⁸ Only the nominal essence or the idea of a thing can be discovered. So general terms are merely names and have no reality outside the mind. It seems then that language would not be a reflection of God’s mind but a human invention in order to classify things. In fact, Locke said, “Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him who uses them.”²⁹

When applied to the church, DiPuccio points out that there is a tie between linguistic nominalism and sacramental nominalism as there is between linguistic realism and sacramental realism. In sacramental nominalism, the sign stands for only an individual’s subjective experience of grace (i.e., its nominal essence), which is hopefully connected in some way to the objective reality of grace revealed historically in Jesus (i.e., real essence). Thus if the sacraments are viewed as symbolic and of a memorial quality, they point to the objective, historical work of Christ, but possess none of the objective efficacy themselves, no real offer of grace.³⁰

From a nominalist point of view, since universal terms are developed out of the experience of the person or community using them, the definition may change over time due to evolving perceptions which are not anchored in objective reality. In realism, on the other hand, signs and terms are apprehended universals. According to Nevin’s mentor Rauch, human language can be trusted to express “the true Being of all that exists.”³¹ Nevin’s understanding of sacraments was that

²⁶ Ibid., 59.

²⁷ Ibid., 120.

²⁸ Ibid., 66.

²⁹ Ibid., 67, footnote.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 68.

signs were very closely linked to the grace they signify, again appealing to the fact of the incarnation as the paradigm for his understanding, for in the incarnation God and creation were joined.³² Just as the Logos assumed common humanity, so the grace of God assumes the elements of the sacraments without destroying their integrity in the created order. To confuse the two natures would be to destroy creation's integrity, but to completely separate them would keep the created order from perfection because that depends on communion with God. If the natural is not joined with the spiritual, it will never be able to reach the end for which it was created. Nevin explained that to sanctify something meant to raise it from nature to the realm of the Spirit by the Word of God and prayer.³³ The dualism belonging to sacramental memorialism destroys the unity of creation as it keeps it completely separated from the divine.

Nevin denied that the water of baptism regenerated or that the actual glorified life of the Lord was actually the bread and wine, for he said the spiritual cannot be imprisoned within the natural. So he saw the Roman Catholic and Lutheran position as identifying Christ's presence too closely with the elements, but on the other end of the spectrum denounced what he called "Puritan" theory (memorialism) as dangerously dualistic.

Nevin appeared similar to moderate realists of the Middle Ages as he affirmed objective reality (the ideal) in organic union with the actual that is available for observation and experience. Empiricism retained belief in the divine and supernatural but denied the objective reality of universal ideas.

William of Ockham was regarded as the father of nominalism. He regarded knowledge of God as a product of mental construction. Copleston summarized Ockham's position this way: "We do not attain a reality, but a nominal representation."³⁴ DiPuccio clarifies that "it is not as though representations are meaningless; rather, they are void of any intuitive knowledge of divine *reality*."³⁵ Intuition here refers to the process of drawing knowledge from one's apprehension of the whole as opposed to the Common Sense inductive way of attempting to build knowledge by studying particulars. Intuition is not about a sudden discovery of something hidden or a baseless feeling that would be subjective. DiPuccio comments that for Nevin what is properly intuitive is "the immediate communion of the affections, will, and intellect with the whole of any object." Thus it is objective.³⁶

Ockham believed that God is not the true focus of theology but only the *concept* of God is. That would mean that an unbeliever can theologize just as much as a

³² Ibid., 70.

³³ Ibid., footnote.

³⁴ Ibid., 11-12.

³⁵ Ibid., 12.

³⁶ Ibid., 149.

believer, but the believer will accept the propositions as true because of the exercise of faith in the authority of God's revelation.

Nevin sensed that nineteenth-century Presbyterianism often promoted propositions of Scripture rather than Christ as its main focus. Common Sense theology presented revelation as essentially cognitive. DiPuccio summarizes Hodge and the Common Sense group as believing that

Truth consists in believing *that* something is true, rather than being the *means* by which we participate in the realities to which such doctrines point. Such biblical rationalism reasons from abstractions to reality rather than from reality to ideas. Thus a doctrine is said to be true because the Bible teaches it, rather than saying that the Bible teaches it because it is true."³⁷

The Common Sense movement began to consider language as an end in itself instead of it being a connection to the world of spiritual reality. In taking the side of Mercersburg DiPuccio argues that while Hodge adhered to the Reformed positions regarding the Trinity and incarnation, he functioned as if Christ's person and life were a collection of various attributes rather than an indivisible whole, with the result that his doctrine of the Eucharist became nominalistic and dualistic, so that he would speak of believers partaking of Christ's atoning efficacy but neglected the idea of participation in the life-giving efficacy of His Person. Hodge denied communion with Christ's humanity and held solely to communion with the divine nature.³⁸ But that leaves the question unanswered as to how one could be united to Christ's divinity without His humanity when the two are inseparably joined.

Further, Hodge did not regard life as a substance or essence but as a quality. He would acknowledge the Eucharist as participation in Christ's flesh (i.e., his atoning efficacy), but not a participation in His humanity. So in Nevin's view, Hodge's position on the Eucharist amounts to a metaphor.³⁹

Nevin stressed that through the Son there is a real knowing of the Father and so of the entire Trinity, but that knowledge is not an infinite or exhaustive knowledge which belongs only to the Son.⁴⁰ A present-day contrast to Nevin would be those who bear Kant's influence. Kant taught that human thinking cannot grasp truth about God, so all alleged apprehensions of God are subjective and experiential rather than objective and real. Postmodernism, as well as some feminist and liberation theology proponents demonstrate agreement with Kant's principles.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 60.

³⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 14-15.

The Marxist Friedrich Engels referred to medieval nominalism as materialism since universal ideas can only be created by the mind as it relies on sensory data. Taken to its logical end, it would have to own only what can be sensed as real. Similarly, Nevin believed that the Common Sense school of thought if taken to its logical end would be bound to deny the supernatural and would be limited only to what belongs to nature. DiPuccio adds, "If our knowledge depends primarily on the way we classify and name things, then we shape reality more than reality shapes us."⁴¹ To be technically accurate, one could no longer ask a question such as "What is this?"; instead, one would be better to ask, "What is my perception of it?".

In its emphasis that only the individual is real, the Common Sense tradition saw humanity, the church and society as a collection of individuals instead of an organic whole. Mercersburg was deeply troubled by the individualism and sectarianism that they observed to be wrecking the American church. Presbyterians and Common Sense Realists held much appreciation for Francis Bacon and his inductive method of science.⁴² Nevin did not object to science and technology, but he did object to the naturalistic presuppositions which promoted a "scaling of the heavens by the power of earth." He would instead espouse a theology/philosophy which envisioned the true order as "a flowing down upon the earth of the powers of heaven."⁴³

In contrast to the idea that society is a collection of individuals, Nevin saw humanity as "the power of a single life." He saw Christ's saving power as centered in the church rather than the individual, and he considered the church to be the embodiment of Christ's life.⁴⁴ To a nominalist, Nevin's premise that believers live among the realities of Trinity, heaven, angels, final judgment, etc., as they are present to us in Christ, could sound frighteningly mystical. This leads to Nevin's hermeneutical philosophy. He shied away from Scripture being a system of abstractions designed to settle in the mind. Instead the Scriptures are a "system of realities, which as the order of nature are to be first apprehended experimentally in the interior life of the soul, and *afterwards* drawn forth and defined to the eye of the understanding."⁴⁵

To understand Scripture one must be in union with Christ. The goal is to participate in His being, and the written Word opens that reality to believers. Nevin's approach, then, would be considered one that carries in it a top-down view of reality rather than one which begins with a study of human perceptions of humanity's plight. Again DiPuccio is able to summarize Nevin's position in these words: "The kingdom of God is the descent of the heavenly sphere into the

⁴¹ Ibid., 16.

⁴² Ibid., 16-17.

⁴³ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁵ John Williamson Nevin, "Is the Bible of God?" *The Friend* 30 Jan. 1834. Quoted in DiPuccio, 18-19.

earthly life of humanity and nature; it is a new creation, a supernatural world of powers revealed from above.”⁴⁶

According to Nevin, the Gospel is the revealing of a new world of powers in the living Christ which transcend the universal constitution of nature. Thus it carries in itself the promise and possibility of victory for fallen humanity over all evils. The new creation takes up the old and without annihilating it fulfills its inmost sense and raises it to its highest power. The new creation in Christ becomes, as DiPuccio states it, “the existential meta-context for all theological reflection,” and that framework is conveyed in the church through Word and sacrament.⁴⁷

If the mission of the church would be defined only as declaration and testimony and not as the medium of Christ’s life, according to Nevin, the way is opened for rationalism to take root, and once that rationalism is free of traditions, it may deny or simply shift the focus away from Christ having come in the flesh. The natural alternative would be a focus on what humans can accomplish.⁴⁸ The church as the medium between Christ and individuals implies the need for visible organization, common worship, ritual and sacraments.

There are some who claim to be spiritual in the sense that they reject outward ordinances and forms and attempt to reduce Christianity to personal mental transactions with God. To do so is actually to withdraw from the life that is within the church and in time to be reduced to merely natural conceptions of religion. Nevin is careful to add, though, that forms alone save no one. But it should be understood that individual piety and sacramental grace need not be posed as enemies. To emphasize the outward means of grace through which believers can be united to Christ’s humanity, and to claim they are as important as personal emotions, is not necessarily substituting the church for Christ. It is preventing the tendency to substitute one’s own self in the place of the Redeemer.⁴⁹ Nevin identified with ancient Christians who held the church to be “the repository actually of superhuman powers among men, the medium not metaphorically but really and truly of grace lodged in its very constitution, from Christ its head, for the salvation of sinners.”⁵⁰ And the ancient church regarded sacraments as vehicles the Spirit used to convey the reality they were designed to represent.

Any hermeneutical process develops out of a view of reality. The incarnation is the metaphysical basis on which Nevin’s hermeneutics are developed. He sees it as the defining moment of history and the controlling principle of reality. In it the ideal became actual. Nevin went so far as to hold that without the incarnation

⁴⁶ DiPuccio, 20.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁸ John Williamson Nevin, “Wilberforce on the Incarnation” *The Incarnate Word: Selected Writings on Christology*, ed. William B. Evans, The Mercersburg Theology Study Series, volume 4, general ed. W. Bradford Littlejohn (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 76.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 85.

God would only be an abstraction to humans, for Christ was a “living transcript and mirror of the Divine.”⁵¹

While nominalism denies the metaphysical reality of universal ideas, Nevin presented the ideal as the cause and essence of reality. Cartesianism separates the ideal and actual, but Nevin insisted that they are organically bound together. With Schleiermacher Nevin recognized Christ as the ideal man. By the incarnation, the ideal/spiritual become embodied.

Nevin explained that the created order can only come to completion in communion with God, so the goal of redemption is to raise fallen creation to sacramental union with Him. The new creation joins itself to human will and intelligence. Again, the imagery is organic and not a mechanical model of salvation.⁵² Writes DiPuccio, “Existentially, then, the life of the Logos, in order to be truth *for us*, must enter into the stream of history and take hold of humanity’s life in its totality.”⁵³

Human nature is not autonomous. It cannot find completion apart from communion with the divine nature, and only the Logos could intentionally take to Himself human nature. Without divine revelation, humanity would not be fully human. Christianity, therefore, perfects history and manifests itself as “the deepest sense of the world’s life.”⁵⁴ This implies it must be far more than law or doctrine. It is a living, organic constitution. Again citing DiPuccio for insight, “the Incarnation is the only power which, by taking up the onward progress of human life, can bring it finally to unity and perfection in God.”⁵⁵ The supernatural transforms the natural without destroying it. The Council of Chalcedon spoke of two natures combining to be one life, but without losing the distinction of natures. The incarnation raised earthly nature into union with the heavenly.

Nevin feared that the strong dualism of Common Sense Realism voided the church and sacraments of abiding power, since it could not grasp the new creation as the completion of the old, barring the supernatural from having any organic connection with nature or history, but instead being only suspended above them.⁵⁶ Thus Nevin saw in his opponents a tendency to present the church as a human organization of voluntary involvement while emphasizing individualism.

Christ, Nevin said, is in no way a product of the world’s natural life. The incarnation introduced an objective supernatural order into the world, not known before in the Old Testament except in short-lived spurts or foretastes, and not

⁵¹ DiPuccio, 25-26.

⁵² Ibid., 26.

⁵³ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 29.

abiding as it would be established in the incarnation.⁵⁷ That life abides in Christ, flowing from His very person.

Counter to materialism or the present-day secular humanism, the perfection of the world then flows from the incarnation wherein humanity is transformed by divine life or power. Nevin can be classified a Christian Platonist who sees earthly things as a temporal shadow of the spiritual, infinite life. The two are related like soul and body, with the spiritual (inner) recognized as first and real, and the natural (outer) being transient and dependent on the spiritual for its existence.⁵⁸ Nevin's adherence to Platonism was not of the sort which saw the spirit or life obscured behind symbols. He saw the language of Scripture as the concrete incarnation of its inner life.⁵⁹ This meant he would value grammatical and historical studies far more than mystics. In fact, DiPuccio states that according to his own research, Nevin's interpretation of Scripture has more in common with the devotional commentaries of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English and Puritan divines than with mysticism.⁶⁰ But he was more Christocentric and metaphysical in his approach than were the Puritans. In the way he employed typology, DiPuccio sees similarities between Nevin and Matthew Henry's style of interpretation. Henry alluded to the sensible world as being a parable of heavenly things.

Nevin rejected Darwinism because Darwin held that lower orders possess within themselves the potential to evolve to a higher. Such an idea stood against Nevin's entire model. DiPuccio summarizes, "Reality does not *ascend* from formless existence to rationality, or from plurality to unity; rather it is genetically *derived* from one cosmic idea which unfolds through kingdoms, orders, classes, genus, species, and individual existence."⁶¹ Creation bears the imprint of the Creator. The definition of humanity, church or society is arrived at deductively, derived from the ideal, instead of assigning priority to the individual as with nominalism. God is underived Being. Man is derived.

DiPuccio puts it this way, "the concept of analogy enables us to view the cosmos as a universal whole grounded upon God's absolute being."⁶² Nevin saw by analogy this principle extrapolated out through nature that the lower is acted on by the higher and assimilated into the one above it with humanity being the perfection of all lesser orders, and he recognized a picture of salvation and perfection as humanity was affected by God. The ground of all orders of existence is the ideas, volitions and thoughts of God.⁶³ So the new order must descend into man from above. Having a body, he shares in the life and laws of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 91.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 93.

⁶¹ Ibid., 37.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 38.

nature. "He is thus the focal point and antitype of the natural order, comprehending and subsuming the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms" (DiPuccio). But then because he possesses mind and will he is the link between the natural and spiritual world. "In humanity, nature attains consciousness and freedom as it ascends into the sphere of reason and will" (DiPuccio).⁶⁴

Yet, humanity is more than the life of nature because it has a supernatural destiny. The drive and desire of the spiritual nature yearns for more than can be found in nature. It yearns for true religion. No amount of human reaching and striving can bring humanity into communion with the reality of the supernatural. Natural religion's vision of God is foggy and incomplete. Nature looks to humanity and humanity to God alone for perfection which is extended through the Spirit in Word and sacrament. God's presence in nature anticipated the incarnation.⁶⁵

Sin dispersed the light of God's presence from humanity's natural capacity. False religions show that there is still a yearning for God, but without objective revelation, natural revelation cannot rise above the limitations of the general mind which projects its own self-image as religion. In Christ the infinite became finite, the invisible visible, the eternal temporal, now able to satisfy human desires of reason, intellect, morality, religion, science and philosophy.⁶⁶ The unseen world can be regarded as being more concrete and real than what is able to be sensed presently in the material world (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:18). "The Incarnation, according to Nevin, was not simply a transient supernatural appearance. It involved a true organic entrance into the life of the world" (DiPuccio).⁶⁷ The eternal Logos entered a permanent union with human nature and serves as life source and ennobled it while preserving the integrity of the created order.⁶⁸

If at this point one would look for any similarity with Puritan hermeneutical philosophy, recall the Puritan treatment of Song of Solomon where the romance depicted there was nearly unanimously considered to point to the relationship of Christ and the church. The Scriptures present man as made in God's image and the earthly tabernacle as reflecting the reality of the heavenly tabernacle (Hebrews 8-9).

Nevin saw sacraments as visible signs of invisible grace or opportunities to be joined to the world of grace. He acknowledged baptism and the Lord's Supper as official sacraments but saw marriage and ordination as having a sacramental sense to them.⁶⁹ In Nevin's way of thinking, if the powers of the world to come are not made present in time and space, then the incarnation and the church are mere abstractions, and if the church were to prove to be only an abstraction,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 40-41.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 55.

perhaps a tool to try to leverage one to greater personal development, then it would be reduced to a merely human society. But if the Eucharist is mystery by which God's supernatural grace is present and partaken of, then the incarnation and church are divine.⁷⁰

Nevin spoke of an inward, living union between believers and Christ to the extent that we are incorporated into His nature and made to "subsist with him by the power of a common life"⁷¹ The life of the Vine must be the same as that found in the branch (John 6).⁷² He believed that faith is not apprehended from knowledge but is apprehended in order to knowledge.⁷³ From Nevin's perspective, Hodge approached the Bible in a way far too rationalistic, armed with inductive methods similar to how a scientist would approach nature. Nevin would employ a similar approach but would maintain an openness to the world of intuition.⁷⁴ At one point he said that a baby knows his mother even before he has any developed knowledge of who she is. He wanted the reader to see the essence of revelation as a divine historical event in human life rather than the mere communication of information.⁷⁵ Faith, Nevin believed, is immediate and self-authenticating, and it unites the supernatural world with the life of humanity just as the two natures of Christ were united in the incarnation.⁷⁶ The rightful object of faith is not the letter of Scripture nor the authority of the church but Christ, the Word made flesh.

Regarding the matter of intuition, Nevin linked that to faith which partakes of the life and power of God. But he did not pursue a mysticism which promises to deliver an unmediated presence of God. While remaining tied to Scripture, he believed that the church is the historical instrument and portal of the divine life and faith. It is the proper setting for the Bible to be joined to the faith of the individual. He did not claim infallibility for the church and acknowledged much error resides in it, but he maintained that it is the proper arena for grasping the priority of the objective nature of revelation.⁷⁷ That is not to say he would forbid individual or private study of the Scriptures. Instead, such private comprehension must be developed in the context of the larger community of the church, both present and past. He refused to entrust absolute power into the hands of the church or to the creeds, for that would invite spiritual despotism.

Thus the object of theology is not speculation or abstraction or merely the collection and arrangement and presentation of truths in relation to each other, but the realities themselves. But those realities are intelligible and so he did not

⁷⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁷¹ Ibid., 57, quoted from *The Mystical Presence*.

⁷² John Williamson Nevin, "The New Creation in Christ" *The Incarnate Word: Selected Writings on Christology*, ed. William B. Evans, The Mercersburg Theology Study Series, volume 4, general ed. W. Bradford Littlejohn (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 35.

⁷³ DiPuccio, 74.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 98-99.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 101.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 150-151.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 105-106.

attempt to dispense with creeds. Without opposing either scientific insight into the nature and grounds of Christianity or methodology in interpretation, he pushed for more – for real contact between one’s spirit and the realities of true religion.⁷⁸ One’s nature has to be changed in order to grasp knowledge truly. The concepts of the fall and regeneration illustrate that point. DiPuccio points out that this locates the roots of engagement with the spiritual world in the subconscious or unconscious.⁷⁹ Puritans focused more on mental apprehension and experience than on such philosophical underpinnings of interaction with spiritual reality as Nevin addresses, but they certainly believed that a change in nature must occur before the mind could engage spiritual truth.

DiPuccio claims that much contemporary hermeneutics are infiltrated by Cartesian and Kantian presuppositions. Descartes presented all knowledge as beginning with the subject. Kant presented it as perspectival. But together they open the door to all interpretations being named valid since there are no grounds to determine which are correct.

Nevin saw the Scriptures as the Divine Life incarnated in human language, supernatural spiritual power and glory manifested in natural form, yet beyond the grasp of the natural mind.⁸⁰ Here the incarnation continues to serve as a paradigm for Nevin’s viewpoint. Like the two natures of Christ, Nevin regarded the words of the text and the supernatural life embodied in them as organically bound together. No matter how firm of a grasp a person has on grammar and history, without true faith uniting a person to Christ by means of the apostolic life and teachings of the church, the attempt to understand Scripture will fail, and one will be reduced to rationalism, historicism or humanism.⁸¹ His sacramental view of Scripture emphasized continuity between the incarnate Word and the written Word. Inspiration and illumination, he held, are part of a continuous creative act of Christ making a continuous stream of life flowing through the Word of God.⁸²

A successor to Nevin, Emanuel Gerhart, wrote that if the written Word is divorced from an objective connection with Christ, it loses its power and is reduced to an external, mechanical power. Christ must be regarded as the beginning, center and end of revelation.⁸³ It should be noted that Nevin admitted later in life that in his early zeal to teach on the significance of the Lord’s Supper, he had failed to make clear the preeminence of the Word over sacraments.⁸⁴ He cited ancient church fathers who understood the Word as “a continuous going forth of life from

⁷⁸ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 76.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁸¹ Ibid., 80.

⁸² Ibid., 112.

⁸³ Annette G. Aubert, “American Mediating Champion: Emanuel Gerhart (1817-1904)” *The New Mercersburg Review* LVI (Spring 2017): 20.

⁸⁴ DiPuccio, 82, footnote.

the Lord.”⁸⁵ It acts as the living soul of the sacraments. That is why it is preeminent over them. The divine life can actually be accessed, then, by the medium of language. Both Scripture and sacraments are expressions of the theanthropic life of Christ. The life of Christ is the substance of the written Word, and the Spirit of Christ is the soul which animates both. Nevin believed that the Word preached is a fuller incarnation of the life of Christ than the written Word is by itself.

Words come from a living being, and so they embody the life of the speaker. Truth is the externalization of thought into word. This led Nevin to claim that the Word of God is the “only medium of direct communication with heaven.”⁸⁶ To understand that medium one must be granted in some sense the same mind as the Author. For the Puritans, that would be to grasp the covenants revealed in Scripture as the basis for understanding Scripture. Nevin might categorize such methodology as abstract, and discredit the system by saying that it rests on God decreeing imputation of sin or federal headship or election by fiat which he could not reconcile with the model of the ideal becoming actual, but these elements need not be set in opposition. A regenerate mind could find an understanding of Scriptural covenants helpful to provide a framework for interpreting specific passages, just as Nevin saw the incarnation as the key to unlocking meaning in particular passages. Rather than covenants, Nevin relied on the Apostles’ Creed.

Rather than see the two models as conflicting and become locked in a debate about which is correct and which is in error, it would be more profitable to employ them as complementary and approach the covenants not as a mechanical tool to unlock meaning but as a framework to develop the incarnation paradigm Nevin saw in all things. Nevin’s sacramental view of the church and his view of the objective presence of Christ with the Scriptures can keep the useful tool of covenant theology from turning into an end in itself and can help steer adherents away from a subjective, mechanical appropriation of them. It is possible to hold to covenant theology without emphasizing the actual at the expense of the ideal or the particular at the expense of the universal as well as the individual over the whole. Mercersburg can add a fuller mystical, sacramental sense to the hermeneutics of covenant theology. While he criticized it sharply, Nevin never fully jettisoned Common Sense Realism.

When Nevin condemned Puritanism, he was referring predominantly to the sectarian, “unchurchly” Protestants of his own day who claimed that they clung to the Bible alone for truth, which in reality meant the Bible plus their own private judgment apart from any input from church history. Every sect brings to the Bible its own interpretive tradition.

In an article entitled “Wilberforce on the Incarnation” Nevin challenged bibliocentric, American Protestantism by claiming that the incarnation, rather than

⁸⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 85.

Scripture is the “principle of Christianity.”⁸⁷ He saw it as more than a means to mediation, for Christ’s mediation is rooted in the constitution of His person.⁸⁸ To be more explicit, the incarnation is not an instrument used to reconcile two sides. It is itself the Mediatorial Fact.⁸⁹ Mediator is not a title conferred because of Christ’s work or because of an appointment made to a position, but a reference to the union of God and Man in one person. Salvation depends on influence from higher nature upon humanity. This describes the incarnation, and through Jesus the new life is spread to others.

The Apostles’ Creed focuses more on the incarnation than the atonement. Building on that observation Nevin wrote, “Christ’s person is thus at once the centre and comprehension of all functions discharged on God’s part towards man, or on man’s part towards God.” “He is the sole channel of grace, and the only medium through which our prayers can ascend acceptably to heaven.” “It makes all the difference in the world for our theology whether the Christian Salvation be apprehended as a living fact thus starting in the person of Christ, or as an arrangement or economy simply in the Divine Mind which Christ came into the world to serve in an outward and instrumental way.”⁹⁰

Christ brought a new order of life into the world at which time He became the nucleus and fountain of salvation. But His work was not complete at the incarnation. It proceeded as He fulfilled His work in all three offices of prophet, priest and king, including His suffering, trial, execution, resurrection, ascension and exaltation. All parts are necessary to conquer death and introduce everlasting righteousness and eternal life into the nature Christ came to redeem.⁹¹ This is the framework which determined Nevin’s hermeneutics. Nevin explains that by his use of the Apostles’ Creed he is representing the mind of the New Testament church, that is, the church that existed at the time the New Testament was written. Without possessing a sense of the early church, there would be no way to access “the true sense and meaning of the Bible.” “The Bible rests on Christ. Light is not more necessary for seeing the world than the idea of Christ is for reading the true mind of God in his written word.”⁹²

Nevin continues in this line of reasoning to say that if the Apostles’ Creed is not the guide for Biblical interpretation, that is, if the direction is sought from those lacking the perspective of the early church, then the way is open to mere human reasoning and rampant sectarianism. “The Bible,” he says, “is not the *principle* of Christianity, neither its origin, nor its fountain, nor its foundation.” The essence of

⁸⁷ William B. Evans, “Editor’s Introduction” to “Wilberforce on the Incarnation” *The Incarnate Word: Selected Writings on Christology*, ed. William B. Evans, The Mercersburg Theology Study Series, volume 4, general ed. W. Bradford Littlejohn (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 46.

⁸⁸ “Wilberforce on the Incarnation,” 55.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 59.

Christianity is neither doctrine nor law but living grace. Instead, “the principle of Christianity is the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the Word made Flesh.”⁹³ The Second Adam is in a deeper sense the root of the race than the first Adam was.⁹⁴ He does clarify that the work of the Second Adam is not applied to the whole race as was the effects of the sin of the first. In the discussion he makes reference to an “election of grace” and of receiving the new Life personally as the only way that one can be saved. However, to remain true to his philosophical paradigm, he insists that Christ’s role as the Second Adam in some way generally is for all the race since all share a common humanity, even though it is only effective for some.

The incarnation is the lifting up of the fallen race of humanity and the act of investing it with glory and honor which it was originally to possess.⁹⁵ Thus all of history was longing for Christ as the necessary end or completion of the human race.⁹⁶ He is the key to all wholeness in human life and to any rational unity in history. “The *Humanity* of Christ is the repository and medium of salvation for the rest of mankind.” Only by being united to His higher nature can fallen sinners be released from the power and curse of sin. The church is “the true fullness or completion of his life in the world.”⁹⁷ “The power of Christ to save rests in his person as a whole and falls back specially on his Divinity; it is the life of the Word which becomes the light of men” (Colossians 2:9-10).⁹⁸

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⁹³ Ibid., 60.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 61.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 62.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 65.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 66.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 67.