

Letter from John Nevin to Henry Harbaugh
(between 1860 and 1867)

What is called the “Mercersburg System of Theology” grew into shape without calculation or plan. It owes its existence properly not to any spirit of philosophical speculation as has been sometimes imagined, but to an active interest in practical Christianity. Questions of religious life have governed in succession the course of its history. Still those have moved, with more or less insight always, round a common centre; and the system is found to be accordingly in the end sufficiently scientific, and in full harmony with itself throughout.

Historically it may be said to have commenced with the publication in 1843 of the *Anxious Bench* – a tract, which found wide favor, but drew upon its author at the same time in certain quarters a perfect hurricane of reproach. Then came the sermon on *Church Unity* preached by Dr. Nevin at the opening of the Triennial Convention of the Reformed Dutch and German Reformed Churches held at Harrisburg in the year 1844; a discourse sanctioned by the full approbation of the worthy representatives of both Churches at the time, the positions of which, however, on the subject of the Mystical Union and in opposition to the sect system, were felt by many afterwards to involve a dangerous tendency. Dr. Schaff’s memorable *Principle of Protestantism* published in 1845, brought out the tendency, in the apprehension of such persons, under still more alarming proportions. This was followed, the next year, by the *Mystical Presence*, with a translation of Dr. Ullman’s most masterly tract on *The Distinctive Character of Christianity* prefixed in the form of a Preliminary Essay. The work was a vindication at large of the old Calvinistic Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, conveying against the general Protestantism of the present time a charge of wholesale defection from the Protestant sacramental faith of the sixteenth century. The tract *Antichrist* was a regular assault upon the sect system, as being in full antagonism to the true idea of the Church, and such a heresy as draws after it virtually in the end a Gnostic denial of the proper mystery of the Incarnation itself. As the occasions of Theological discussion were multiplied, it was felt necessary to establish a special organ for carrying it forward; the more so as it seemed altogether impractical to gain a fair hearing in any other quarter. Hence, the *Mercersburg Review* the pages of which for some years form a sort of progressive picture of the system to whose exposition and defence it has been all along devoted. So much for the general history of the movement. We come now to what is more important, the organization of inward structure of the Mercersburg System regarded as a whole.

Its cardinal principle is the fact of the Incarnation. This viewed not as a doctrine or speculation but as a real transaction of God in the world, is regarded as being necessarily itself the essence of Christianity, the sum and substance of the whole Christian redemption. Christ saves the world, not ultimately by what he teaches or by what he does, but by what he *is* in the constitution of his own person. His person in its relations to the world carries in it the power of victory over sin, death, and hell, the force thus of a real atonement or reconciliation between God and man, the triumph of a glorious resurrection from the dead, and all the consequences for faith which are attributed to this in the grand old symbol called the Apostles’ Creed. In the most literal sense accordingly Christ is here held to be the “way, the truth and the life,” the “resurrection and the life,” the principle of “life and immortality” - the “light” of the world, its “righteousness,” and its “peace.” The “grace which brings salvation” in this view is of course always a real affluence from the new order of existence, which has been thus made to be by the exaltation of the Word made flesh at the right hand of God. It must be supernatural as well as natural, and the organs and agencies by which it works must in the nature of the case carry with them objectively some thing of the character and force. To resolve all into the opinions and feelings of those who call themselves believers, is to do away with the proper objects of faith altogether; for these must be apprehended as actually at hand under a supernatural form. They are all mysteries, holding in them objectively some measure of what belongs to the mystery of Christ’s glorification. In this way the Church is an object of faith – the presence of a new creation in the old

world of nature – the body of Christ through which as a medium and organ he reveals himself and works till the end of time. Its ministers hold a divine power from him by apostolical succession. Its sacraments are not signs merely, but goals of the grace they represent. Baptism is for the remission of sins. The Eucharist includes the real presence of Christ's whole glorified life, in a mystery, by the power of the Holy Ghost. The idea of the Church, so sound, it is made to be in this way an object of faith, involves necessarily the attributes which were always ascribed to it in the beginning, unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity. The spirit of sect, as it cleaves to Protestantism at the present time, is a very great evil, which is of itself sufficient to show that if Protestantism had any historical justification in the beginning, its mission thus far has been only half fulfilled, and that it can be rationally approved only as it is taken to be an interimistic preparation for some higher and better form of Christianity hereafter.

The distinguishing character of the Mercersburg Theology, in one word, is its Christological interest, its way of looking at all things through the Person of the crucified and risen Saviour. This, as the world now stands, embraces necessarily all that enters into the conception of the Church Question – the problem of problems for the Christianity of the present time. That the system has been able to solve in full the difficulties belonging to this great subject, its friends have never pretended for one moment to imagine. On the contrary, they have always confessed their sense of vast practical embarrassment confronting their views. But they have not considered this a sufficient reason for refusing to affirm what has appeared to them to be biblically or historically true, in spite of such inconvenience. Facts and principles have a right to challenge attention at times, even if no satisfactory scheme can be offered for their application. The Mercersburg Theology claims the advantage of standing here, in its main positions, on the same ground with the faith of the early Church. Its Christology is that of the ancient Creeds. It insists on casting the Christian belief of the world still in the same primitive mould; and the burden of its controversy with those who stand opposed to it is that they either ignore the Apostles' Creed altogether or else make no earnest with its proper historical sense, but vainly imagine that it may be superseded or mended by other modern forms of confession, more suited to their own unchurchly sense.

In thus agreeing with the Creed, the system of course holds itself to be to the same extent in full agreement with the proper sense of the Scriptures; where in truth all stress is laid on the Person of Christ, on his resurrection from the dead, on his glorification at the right hand of God, on the sending of the Holy Ghost, and on his presence and working through all time in the Church which is his body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.

Dr. Nevin