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Potentially Subversive Protestant Idea
Douglas F. Ottati

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A BOOK REVIEW

Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some
Misunderstandings *James R. Payton, Jr.*

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The Mercersburg Society has been formed to uphold the concept of the Church as the Body of Christ, Evangelical, Reformed, Catholic, Apostolic, organic, developmental, and connectional. It affirms the ecumenical Creeds as witnesses to its faith and the Eucharist as the liturgical act from which all other acts of worship and service emanate.

The Society pursues contemporary theology in the Church and the world within the context of Mercersburg Theology. In effecting its purpose the Society provides opportunities for fellowship and study for persons interested in Mercersburg Theology, sponsors an annual convocation, engages in the publication of articles and books, and stimulates research and correspondence among scholars on topics of theology, liturgy, the Sacraments, and ecumenism.

The **New Mercersburg Review** is designed to publish the proceedings of the annual convocation as well as other articles on the subjects pertinent to the aims and interests of the Society.

From the Editor

F. Christopher Anderson

This issue has two excellent presentations from our 2017 Annual Convocation that centered on commemorating The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. At minimum that will help preachers, teachers, and lay people to prepare for October 31st, 2017.

Douglas F. Ottati is the author of the two- volume Systematic Theology on Eerdmanns entitled *Theology for Liberal Protestants* and many other works. His presentation not only teaches us about the history and theology of *Sola gratia* (grace alone) but it challenges us on how to apply it today. He writes: “My aim is to comment on how it comes to expression in Luther and in Calvin, register where I think the Reformers go wrong, radicalize the idea, and then show its continuing relevance as a basis for a Christian humanism and a critique of American culture.” He then does exactly what he says he will do. Enjoy.

William B. Evans is the author of the book *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology*. In this article he looks at one question: “What are the similarities and the differences between Reformation Theology and Mercersburg Theology?” “In seeking to answer this question we will engage as test cases four areas often thought to be emblematic of the magisterial Protestant Reformation: the theology of the Word, the priesthood of all believers, justification by faith, and divine sovereignty. We will explore the continuities and discontinuities that Mercersburg evinces.”

Also included is a brief sermon by Thomas D. Busted on John 15:1-7. This passage is of great interest to Mercersburg Theology, and he looks at it through a very interesting lens.

Lastly we have a brief review of what I think is a very helpful book for commemorating the Reformation. I think it would work well as a text for an adult study group. The title says it all: *Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings*. The author is James R. Payton, Jr. Enjoy!

Grace Alone: Interpreting and Revising a Great and Potentially Subversive Protestant Idea

Douglas F. Ottati
(Mercersburg.6.6.17a)
(10:30-12:00 noon)

You were probably introduced to the watchwords *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia* in seminary when you studied the Reformation of the 16th century. As Bill Evans reminded us yesterday, Philip Schaff says *sola scriptura* indicates a more or less *methodological principle* having to do with the Bible and church teaching. This was shared by virtually all of the historic Protestant parties, though it was differently embodied in confessional and non-confessional churches. The idea is that church teaching or doctrine must always be subject to criticism in the light of interpretations of scripture and the gospel. Scripture alone, in this sense, is the final court of appeal.

Sola gratia or grace alone was a basic *material principle* shared by the “magisterial” reformers, Luther and Calvin, but not by all of the “left wing” or Anabaptist ones. It summarizes Luther’s stunning simplification of the content of the gospel. People are *rightwised* in God’s sight – they are justified or saved – by grace alone rather than by any merit or work. That is, the single most important aspect of human life – our relationship with God – is entirely a matter of unmerited gratuity. It is a gift rather than an accomplishment. John Calvin, who, in some respects, was Luther’s most able disciple, agreed. We depend for life, existence, justification, and renewed life on the sovereign God of grace.

This morning, I am concerned with this second idea. My aim is to comment on how it comes to expression in Luther and in

Calvin, register where I think the Reformers go wrong, radicalize the idea, and then show its continuing relevance as a basis for a Christian humanism and a critique of American culture.

Augustine

Luther's idea may look as if it suddenly burst upon the scene, but actually it was a long time in the making. Much early Christian literature, e.g., the Didache, tended to present Christian faith as a choice between two ways: a way of darkness, immorality, and death, on the one hand, and a way of light and righteous faithfulness on the other. To a significant degree, early Mediterranean monasticism represented an intensification of this idea. And so, we are not surprised to find Pelagius, an Irish monk, setting about the task of improving what he took to be the lax spiritual and moral atmosphere at Rome during the late fourth century. The influential spiritual guide began workshops by telling participants about the "strength" of human nature, and the great and good things we may accomplish.¹ He counseled his charges to aim high – to engage in right actions and practices according to the lawful standard of the gospel – and so break through the accumulated sinful habits that had encrusted their wills. That is, Pelagius represented a later articulation of the Christianity of the two ways; he tried to found spiritual communities in which the discipline of the monastery might be practiced by all.

By the time Augustine came across Pelagius' teachings, the good bishop had already opposed the Donatists, a Christian party in northern Africa, which maintained that the church is holy because and so long as its leadership remains righteous and faithful. Augustine insisted, by contrast, that the holiness of the church lies not in its spiritual and moral perfection, but in the grace of God dispensed in its sacraments. He claimed that the church is more like a hospital for sinners than a gymnasium for accomplished spiritual and morals athletes, and so we are not surprised that he also opposed Pelagius.

¹ Pelagius, "Letter to Demetrias" in *Theological Anthropology*, tr. and ed. J. Patout Burns (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p.40.

Essentially, Augustine claims, we do not possess free and healthy wills that have merely become encrusted or submerged by removable layers of bad habits. Peel away the layers, and you shall find a fundamentally disoriented will or capacity for choosing in bondage to something deeper, namely wrong loves or a corrupted heart. That is, for Augustine, the basis for our identities and practical orientations lies deeper than our wills and our own choices. Who we are is in large part a matter of what we love or desire, but we do not choose our loves; instead, our loves befall us. And a corrupted or sinful heart either loves the wrong things altogether or else loves the right things wrongly, e.g., companionship, wealth, fame. Its inordinate desires and disordered loves, in turn, disorient and misdirect the will, so that, when a sinner does as she pleases, she freely chooses wrongly.

Augustine maintains that this deep-seated corruption of the person cannot be corrected by trying really hard to do otherwise. Why? Because the effort of a misdirected will can only yield further misdirected choices. If we are to be rehabilitated, then, we need something more than heroic effort and discipline (or a further reliance on our misshapen selves). We need a more radical medicine, a new fundamental love or disposition, a new heart given to us by grace and the Spirit that can redirect our wills. Then (and only then) God or the true good becomes pleasing to us. Then (and only then), when we do as we please, we choose God (or the true good) and also are able to reorder our other desires (for companionship, wealth, etc.) in accord with that primary devotion.

Parenthetically, Augustine also envisioned the monastic life differently than did Pelagius and many others. The point of being a monk, for Augustine, is *not* to earn exceptional merits before God either for oneself or the church by means of an especially rigorous discipline or obedience. Instead, the point is to live a rigorous life of service to God and to others *out of gratitude for the gift of grace and the Spirit*.²

² This was a reinterpretation of monasticism that troubled monks from Hadramentum when, upon visiting another monastery in northern Africa, they ran across a manuscript of Augustine's with which they were previously

Luther and Calvin

One way to understand Luther's idea of grace alone is as an intensification of Augustine's anti-Pelagian stance. For Luther, you and I do not prove or earn our worth before God by our accomplishments or achievements. Instead, we are saved by grace alone. Our salvation isn't earned; it is simply bestowed upon us by God as a free gift.

Even so, Luther does not repeat Augustine. Consider a key phrase: justification by grace through faith. *Justification*, for Luther, introduces an intensified forensic note not found in Augustine. It refers to being accepted, counted, or deemed righteous in God's judgment or sight despite our actual sins and faults. We are, according to Luther, at the same time both justified (or counted as righteous) and sinners. And, we are justified or counted as righteous *by grace*, or by God's unmerited favor and free gift. For Christ's sake, God is gracious to you and to me; for Christ's sake, God gives us a break by not holding our sins and faults against us. Finally, this takes place *through faith* in Jesus Christ and his victory over sin and death. Through faith in Jesus Christ we gain access to God's grace and acceptance. *Then* (and only then) the circle of misshapen choices and desires may be broken, and out of gratitude for God's free acceptance, our faith and trust may become active in works of love – *not*, let it be said, in order to gain merit or special favor with God, but simply in response to the prior fact that God first loves us.

We should also say what Luther does *not* mean. He does not mean that we obtain God's grace as a result of trying really hard to believe. That, in fact, would turn faith into a meritorious work of credulity. Luther thinks the faith through which we gain access to God's free acceptance is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit. So here, according to Luther, is the very good news of the gospel: *in Christ*

unfamiliar. See Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998).

and through faith, God simply is gracious to you and to me, and there is nothing we need to do to make this so.

Parenthetically, we should note that Luther also did not regard the monastic life as especially meritorious. If you were a monk trying to do good in order to gain special merit either for yourself or for the church, he had a word for you. “Stop!” And so Luther did when he left the cloister and married a nun, in order to live in the midst of interdependent interrelations in which to serve others rather than be set apart in a special holy and “righteous” community (a genuinely counter-cultural move).

Calvin follows Luther in many of these respects, though he has no personal experience of the monastery, and he places a bit more emphasis on sanctification. He refers to “a double grace.”³ We are justified or reckoned righteous in Christ, meaning that we are acquitted of guilt “as if” our innocence were confirmed.⁴ And, we are sanctified, raised to newness of life in the Spirit, and turned in service toward God and neighbor.⁵ So, for Calvin, too, faith and the life of faith depend entirely on God’s grace.

Where Luther and Calvin Go Wrong

Luther’s idea of grace alone is, I think, unquestionably superb, but Luther himself fails to follow through its implications for Christian missions to the Jews. Early in his career, he urges toleration because he believes that, with the Protestant rediscovery of the gospel, the Jews may convert. By the 1530s and 1540s, however, and particularly as he believes the Last Judgment is near and the devil will be unleashing his strongest attacks on the church, the German Reformer regards Jewish resistance to the gospel as a stubborn, blasphemous, and intolerable apostasy. His tract “On the Jews and Their Lies” (1545) argues that (1) “[i]n honor of our Lord and of Christendom,” Christians should set fire to synagogues and schools, and bury what they do not burn. (2) Jews’ houses, “where they pursue the same aims as in their synagogues,” should also be

³ *ICR*, (p.723)

⁴ *ICR*, (p. 728)

⁵ *ICR*, 3.3.9-10.

destroyed. (Instead they can live in barns.) (3) Their prayer books, Talmudic writings, and Bibles should be confiscated. (4) Rabbis should be “forbidden to teach . . . on pain of loss of life and limb.” (5) Safe conduct for Jews on the highways should be abolished. (6) Young Jews should be forced to earn their living at menial labor. But, as even these measures cannot guarantee that Jews would not harm “us or our wives, children, servants, cattle, etc.,” the only solution is to expel Jews from “our country,” as has already been done in “France, Spain, Bohemia, etc.”

This is a wrong turn. One reason Luther’s treatise rings hollow as a witness to the gospel of grace and acceptance is because it fails to pursue the thoroughgoing re-conception of evangelism required by the logic of grace alone.⁶ This morning, however, let me simply ask this. If faith in the gospel is itself a free gift of grace and the Spirit, then how is it that the failure of Jews to convert is due to their blasphemous stubbornness and recalcitrance? How is it their fault if they do not receive the Spirit’s gift? In the final analysis, the good news of grace and the gospel not only gives us no reason to boast; it also keeps us from concluding that, when persons and communities fail to embrace the gospel, it must literally be their own damned fault.

Calvin’s understandings of Judaism and of the Jews as God’s people differ rather sharply from Luther’s, partly due to his insistence that the election of God is “without repentance.” The covenant with Israel, for Calvin, is a dimension of the one covenant of grace and so God’s blessing remains with the Jews.⁷ Nevertheless, and as every student of doctrine knows, there is another side to Calvin’s doctrine of election, namely, the claim that,

⁶ Douglas F. Ottati, *Theology for Liberal Presbyterians and Other Endangered Species* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2006), pp. 49-61.

⁷ ICR, 4.16.14. See also Calvin’s comments on Romans 11:29. “. . . the counsel of God, by which He has once condescended to choose them [the Jews] for Himself as a peculiar nation, stands firm and immutable.” Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, p. 257. The words in parentheses are mine.

before the foundation of the world, God predestines “some to salvation, others to destruction.”⁸

There is nothing the reprobate can do to alter their fate, but to those who find this unjust, Calvin responds that God’s will is “the highest rule of righteousness,” and so “whatever he wills . . . must be considered righteous.”⁹ Calvin’s fuller defense of the doctrine points to experience – we see, for example, that, “though the voice of the gospel addresses all in general . . . the gift of faith is rare.”¹⁰ It acknowledges mystery – as Augustine noted, “we cannot comprehend” why God created persons who are simply bound for destruction.¹¹ And it appeals to God’s inscrutable discrimination – the fact that God “does not . . . adopt all . . . but gives to some what he denies to others” illumines God’s mercy.¹² “The very inequality of his grace proves that it is free.”¹³

This, I think, is another wrong turn. Precisely in an effort to stress God’s sovereign grace, Calvin fashions an understanding of predestination that calls into question whether God really is gracious at all. One basic vector of Calvin’s theology is that we know ourselves as well as others to be valued creatures in relation to the God who bestows gifts as Creator and Redeemer; God’s gracious regard for humans and for other creatures therefore endues them with worth. But does a graceful God create good, distinctively equipped humans capable of mirroring the divine, creatures whom God loves and values, but who are also, by a divine and eternal decree that takes priority over both creation and redemption, bound only and necessarily for eternal alienation and torment?

⁸ ICR, 3.21.

⁹ ICR, 3.23.2.

¹⁰ ICR, 3.22.10.

¹¹ ICR, 3.23.5.

¹² ICR, 3.21.1.

¹³ ICR, 3.21.6. Calvin insists on this doctrine, which he admits “human curiosity” may render “confusing and even dangerous,” and which he warns should not be pursued without restraint partly because he finds it in some (not very highly developed) New Testament passages.¹³ More systematically, he thinks it shows that God’s justification of sinners, as also God’s election of Israel, is by grace and without deference to merits or demerits.

Reformed orthodoxy repeats Calvin's doctrine,¹⁴ but the most important Reformed theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reject it. Friedrich Schleiermacher says the doctrine leaves Christian piety beset by contrary emotions: gratitude for one's own blessedness and ever-renewed sadness for all those who are lost. He also notes that to say God creates one segment of humanity for redemption and another for destruction threatens to introduce a Manichean cleavage at odds with piety's conviction that God sends God's son out of love for the entire world.¹⁵

Karl Barth claims that, in the light of God's act in Christ, we see that God's sovereign deity includes God's humanity or free love and affirmation of man.¹⁶ Inspired by passages such as Colossians 1:20, where the event of Jesus Christ presses toward the reconciliation of all, Barth says we see that in the covenant of grace (as it comes to expression in God's promise to Noah, God's promise to Abraham, and elsewhere) the whole of humanity, rather than only a part of it, is the outer circle of which the relation with Israel forms the inner circle.¹⁷ The implications, as Barth well knows, are far-reaching and profound. "Would that Calvin had energetically pushed ahead on this point in his Christology, his doctrine of God, and his teaching about predestination, and his ethics! His Geneva would then not have become such a gloomy affair."¹⁸ Indeed, the

¹⁴ For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith states the doctrine of double predestination quite clearly. "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his own glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death." It also does not shy away from the ready implication, namely, that, in Christ, God's redeeming grace is limited to the elect. BOC, 6.016, 6.071

¹⁵ CF, #120 (p. 558). It is also a cleavage at odds with Calvin's affirmation that God finds something to love in fallen humanity (ICR 2.16.3). Moreover, we should note, too, that the doctrine of double predestination also threatens the integrity of Christian ethics because it runs afoul of a primary feature or vector of a renewed, regenerate, and sanctified manner of life. It threatens to undercut love of neighbor, or what Jonathan Edwards calls a true virtue that extends to all beings. H. Richard Niebuhr also claims that, in their eschatologies, Augustine, Calvin, and others fall into an inappropriate dualism. See *Christ and Culture*.

¹⁶ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 51.

¹⁷ CD, 4/1, p. 51.

¹⁸ *The Humanity of God*, p. 49.

practical import only becomes more intense given Barth's own encounter with a genocidal National Socialist ideology that denies the dignity and worth of humans as humans, rather than, say, only as members of one or another ethnic or national community.

Reading Paul

What lies behind and beneath the Reformers' wrong turns, I think, is a failure to appreciate the truly radical nature of their idea. Grace alone, I believe, inevitably points to the fundamental apprehension that God simply *is* the God of grace whose will or dynamic tendency it is to bestow existence, life, and renewed life. Let me underscore this point by suggesting how my interpretation of Romans 4 differs from the ones offered by Luther and Calvin.

In Romans, Paul recognizes that the law is the standard for right conduct within Israel's covenant with God. The law, given at Mt. Sinai and including both moral and ritual requirements, is a basic institution that constitutes Israel as God's people. But, says Paul, *before* there was the law, *before* the Ten Commandments were given at Sinai, Abraham, the father of Israel, was already in right relationship with God, already justified in God's sight. And so the question arises: If Abraham did not obtain his justification before God by fulfilling the law, by acting well, or by his own accomplishment, then how did he come to stand in right relationship with God? Paul's answer: Abraham trusted that, when he and Sarah could no longer expect to have a child, God would give them a son. He trusted further that, through this unlikely son, the People of God would come to be and "all the families of the earth" would be blessed. And, says Paul, Abraham's faith or trust that God would do this "was reckoned to him as righteousness" (4:22).

The Reformers say Paul presents Abraham as an example, pattern, or mirror of righteousness for all, and I agree.¹⁹ The difference comes in how we understand 4:16-17.

¹⁹ *Luther's Works*, Volume 25, *Lectures on Romans: Glosses and Scholia*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), p. 85; Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians*, p. 82.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”) – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

According to Luther, Abraham trusts that God is *sufficiently powerful* to do as God has promised, an emphasis that follows from 4:21, which says that Abraham “gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” Calvin, commenting on 4:16, says Abraham’s faith is “based on the goodness of God alone,” and that “nothing is set before faith but mere grace” or gratuitous favor. But commenting on 4:17 he says that, since there was at present no token of God’s promise, “it was hence necessary for him [Abraham] to raise up his thoughts to the power of God, by which the dead are quickened.”²⁰

I want to place the emphasis elsewhere. God’s promise / act is not simply to give Abraham a son, Isaac, but through Isaac also to make Abraham the father of a people more numerous than the sands and to bless all the families of the earth. Thus, in Paul’s telling of it, I think, Abraham did not trust *only* in God’s power, he also trusted in *God’s gracious disposition to himself and, ultimately, to all*. Abraham trusted that, through Isaac, the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist” would bring about the covenant of grace and renewed life, a blessing to all nations. Abraham trusted that, resident in the God who creates, who brings things into existence and bestows life, is the gracious

²⁰ Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, pp. 173, 175. Calvin says, further, “the character of the divine calling is, that they who are dead are raised by the Lord, that they who are nothing begin to be something through his power. The word *call* ought not to be confined to preaching, but it is to be taken, according to the usage of Scripture, for raising up; and it is intended to set forth more fully the power of God, who raises up, as it were by a nod, whom he wills” (175).

divine disposition to do so, and he trusted that this God would *continue* to exercise this same gracious disposition. Abraham's confidence is that the Creator who graciously bestows existence and life is also the Redeemer who graciously reconciles and renews. In short, his faith is that it is simply who God is, God's character, or the divine tendency to be the God of grace who bestows gifts of life, existence, and renewed life. And now, says Paul, we encounter this same God and excellent divine tendency through faith in Jesus Christ; now, we apprehend this same God and divine excellence bringing about new life and new creation through Jesus' ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection.

What, then, shall we say? Simply this: that the great God of glory who creates is the good God of grace who reconciles, redeems, and re-creates. This is who God has been, is, and shall continue to be. For this reason, when we know who God is, we also know that we are accepted and stand in right relationship with God by grace alone. God is not first a powerful agent and then, secondarily, one who decides to be gracious in order to demonstrate that God is powerful, discriminate, and free. The very good news of the gospel is really quite different and very much better than this: *God simply is the God of grace who is gracious to you, to me, and to all creatures.*

The God of Grace in Our Experience

With this revision of the Reformers' idea in mind, we may ask some questions. *Where* do we find the God of grace who calls into existence things that are not? *Where* do we find the God who bestows existence and life and worth as free gifts? The answer is in both creation and redemption.

You and I encounter the God of grace who bestows existence, life, and worth as free gifts in creation, or in our ordinary and everyday lives in the world. Ecclesiastes says that everything has its season. We might say that all things – plants, animals, skies, and stars – have their places and times within God's great cosmos. And, since we, too, have been given the gifts of life and existence, we, too, have our places and times within the world and its seasons. We, too, so far as we know now, have our places and times as a

result of the Big Bang, the formation of elements, the emergence of the organic from the material, and the stunningly long and complex story of solar, planetary, geological, and biological evolution. You and I exist and participate in the great, grand, and cosmic Divine Project of stars and seasons and birds and moons and oceans and life, *not because of anything we have done, but simply as a result of processes over which we have little or no control.* So, one way we experience the God of grace who calls into existence things that did not exist is simply by living, breathing, and existing in the passage of everyday life. (There is a line from the Qur'an that fits here: God "is closer to you than your jugular vein.") My life, your life, and the lives of everyone we know – as well as the times and places in which we are graced to participate, whether in Pennsylvania, Brazil, or on some other planet – are not the results of what we creatures have done. They are bestowals, gifts of time and place in and through which we may experience the gracious God who calls into existence things that are not. (Keep this in mind the next time you mimic Psalm 8, look out into the nighttime sky, and wonder what we humans are that we have a place and a time.)

Again, and as we have seen, Paul emphasizes that we also experience the God of grace in the event of reconciliation, or in our acceptance and consequent renewal as we encounter Jesus Christ and the Spirit's gift of faith. We encounter the God of grace as we hear the preaching of the church, as we read the New Testament and confront the kingdom-minded man from Nazareth who embodies grace and care by healing the sick, and blessing the poor, and eating and drinking with all the wrong people. We experience and apprehend the God of grace as Christ marks off and empowers a manner of living that glorifies God for the gifts of life, acceptance, and new life by looking to the interests of others. We experience and apprehend the God of grace as we share in Christ's risen life.

Why the Revised Idea Is Relevant, Even Subversive

Properly and, as I think, also radically understood, the idea of grace alone remains relevant for two related reasons. 1) It points to the unshakable basis for a truly *theological* Christian humanism.

2) It claims that persons have worth quite apart from their accomplishments or achievements.

Christian theological humanism emerges from the conviction that God simply **is** the God of grace. Consider, for example, Jesus' teachings about the love of God and neighbor, and about the divine benevolence and love of enemies. The summary of the law on the lips of the contentious lawyer in Luke 10:27 and on the lips of Jesus in Matthew 22 and Mark 12 links love of neighbor with love of God. It also parallels the summary given by Jesus' contemporary, Rabbi Hillel, and Bible scholars are divided over whether early Christian communities simply assigned it to Jesus or assigned it to him because he agreed with Hillel. In any case, however, the summary accords with the other-regarding tendency that characterizes Jesus' teaching more generally. And, I think, the Puritan, Jonathan Edwards, has it about right. "Love of God is the foundation of gracious love to men." Others are then loved because "they have the nature or spiritual image of God, or because of their relation to God as his children, as his creatures, as those who are beloved of God, or those to whom divine mercy is offered, or in some other way from regard to God."²¹

Love of God indissolubly unites with the disposition to love one's neighbor because respect for God's reign entails loyalty to the creatures that God creates and upholds, or to those to whom God shows mercy and benevolence by bestowing upon them the gifts of existence and life. And, of course, the God of grace makes "his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." (Matthew 5:45) The God of grace bestows gifts of life, existence, and renewed life on the just and the unjust. Theologically speaking, then, if one loves the God of grace, one is disposed to love one's neighbors, or all of the creatures to which God is gracious (which is, in fact, **all** creatures). Carried to its appropriate and radical conclusion, then, the conviction that God is the God of grace means that love of God entails love of neighbor

²¹ *WJE*, Vol. 8, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, "Charity and Its Fruits," pp. 133-4.

and even enemies. Considered in relation to this God – a truly inalienable relation – all are rendered valuable.

In our own place and time as in others, many people, including proponents of crusading religion, nationalism, racial discrimination, and clashes of civilizations, fail to discern that the worth of persons is non-negotiable and secure. For the Christian humanist, however, the question is *not* whether *we* shall bestow worth on different persons and groups, but only whether we (our communities, religious associations, societies, and governments) shall *recognize* and *acknowledge* what is always already the case. People have worth not only as Christians or Germans or Americans or Caucasians or Muslims or what-have-you. In God's sight, *humans as humans have worth*, and we therefore have moral duties to all, including to our adversaries.

The radical conviction that God simply *is* the God of grace who is gracious to all forms the deep foundation for a Christian humanism that finds itself at odds with the in-group / out-group impulses and closed-society commitments that so often animate nations, religious communities, and cultures (whether traditional or secular). Where it is not compromised or watered-down, this theological humanism resists even the most ingenious arguments for targeting noncombatants whether in skyscrapers or in villages, and for torturing prisoners whether at home or abroad. It strives for justice for all, and it attends especially to the vulnerable and the oppressed. Today it must also condemn unrestrained violence, every instance of indiscriminate bombing and every terrorist attack. It stands with the people of Aleppo and Kabul and Manchester and London.

This brings us to the *subversive* element. America today is fragmented and often occupied by conflicts between varied in-groups and out-groups, a culture of incivility marked by suspicion, discrimination, and Islamophobia. It desperately needs persons to witness to a truer humanism. But there is more.

Our competitive capitalist and commercial environment finally devalues persons because it insists that their worth is a matter of their merits and achievements. A progressive, somewhat classist variety of this insistence often appeals to beneficiaries of

elite educations who favor a kind of careerist / intellectual “meritocracy,” and tend to look down on the rest. A conservative laissez faire variety values those who make money and become “successes” – so much so, that a recurrent weakness of American politics is to overestimate the transferability of competence in business and finance to almost every other aspect of life and culture, including political leadership.

I do not have time this morning even to outline the sustained cultural analysis these claims require and deserve.²² But I can make a few, semi-sermonic remarks.

If you are a young professional, working hard at your career and trying to raise your family, perhaps you have received the impression, or even heard people say that, in order to have worth, you must compete and achieve and succeed. Perhaps you have encountered the idea that, in order to be worthy or even to justify yourself, you need to make money and be recognized as an accomplished professional. *But don't you believe it.* By the light of the very good news of the gospel and the strange logic of grace alone, you have worth in God's sight whether or not you turn out to be a recognized success.

Perhaps you are a high school student working hard to get good grades, so that you can go to a good college (maybe even Davidson College), so that you can get a good and meaningful job, and so that you can win the approval of teachers and parents and peers. Maybe, from time to time, you get anxious because somewhere you've gotten the impression that you matter and make a difference only if you succeed, only if you become one of the educated elite. *But don't you believe it.* Remember the very good news of the gospel and the strange logic of grace alone: you are valuable in God's sight whether or not you get good grades or high SAT scores. You have worth, and your worth is not something that you need to manufacture or bring about by your own actions and achievements. You have worth, and your worth in God's sight is

²² See “Love Your Enemies: The Teaching of Jesus and the Theological Dynamic of Crusading Violence.”

something inalienable that you just can't shake. No school, no business, no profession, and no social clique can take it away.

Or maybe you are closer to my age, and as you look back you sometimes wonder whether you lived up to your potential, whether you might have done better, whether you could have been more important, prominent, and worthy if only you had accomplished more and made fewer mistakes. Well, all that's as may be. *But don't you believe it.* Remember the very good news of the gospel: you have worth in God's sight, and that is true whether or not your past accomplishments seem appropriately impressive by your own estimate or anyone else's.

Now for one more thing – a consciousness-raising exercise I think evangelists, such as Billy Graham, too rarely ask their hearers to try. You have worth in God's sight. As Paul Tillich used to say, you are accepted. That is a feature of the good news of the gospel of grace. But now, take a moment to look around this room and, in your mind's eye, also imaginatively to envision the many other people around this community, nation, and world. When you and I do this, we see Hispanics, blacks, Arabs, whites, Asians, women, men, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, gays, heterosexuals, the intelligent, the not-so-intelligent, the successful, the busted, the brave, the not-so-brave, and more. We may wonder sometimes whether all of these others have truly made positive contributions, whether all these others have done enough to prove their value and their worth, and thus to deserve our good will and attention. *But don't you believe it.* Don't be fooled by prejudices, manipulative politicians, or fears of those who are different. In light of the very good news of the gospel and the strange logic of grace alone, these other persons and groups also have been called into existence and given the great and good gift of life by the God who creates and redeems. They, too, have a place and a time; they, too, have value in God's sight.

Bearing Our Reformation Heritage

Five hundred years on, the Protestant churches and educational institutions that trace their heritages back to the Reformation of the sixteenth century in Europe show considerable

signs of wear and tear. It is difficult to know just how many will survive current trends toward secularity and post-denominational Christianity. You may even have toyed with the notion that today the most faithful thing to do is simply to turn out the lights. But don't believe it. Grace alone – the material principle of the Reformation – shouldn't be abandoned or left in the dark. It's a keeper. It ought to be retrieved and radicalized as the basis for a truly Christian humanism and for a fundamental critique of American culture.

Mercersburg and the Reformation: Continuities, Discontinuities, and Lessons to Be Learned

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This topic—Mercersburg and the Reformation—is a splendid opportunity to engage great themes of the Protestant Reformation (that watershed in Western cultural history) and the Mercersburg Theology movement (less important in the larger scheme of things, but still of great interest to readers of this journal). And yet here we confront complexities that take the form of both continuities and discontinuities—between the Reformation and Mercersburg, but also between the Reformation and later Protestantism.

We think immediately of the two seminal texts that emerged from the first decade of the Mercersburg movement. There is Philip Schaff's *The Principle of Protestantism*, which schematizes the Reformation in terms of a formal principle (the authority of Scripture) and a material principle (justification by faith), but it then proceeds to place the Reformation in a larger Hegelian and Schellingian framework of historical development involving both the Catholic past and the church of the future that will combine the best aspects of Catholicism and Protestantism.²³ In other words, for Schaff not only was there considerable good in the Catholic past, but the Reformation itself was a moment in the dialectic of history to be transcended rather than the last word.

Then there is John W. Nevin's *The Mystical Presence*, which sought to retrieve John Calvin's doctrine of the true presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper from the subjective clutches of

²³ Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, trans. John W. Nevin, ed. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1964).

American “Puritans.”²⁴ Nevin was swimming against the current of American Protestantism, and the mere suggestion that the sacraments might actually *do something* was troubling to many.

Thus we are not surprised that almost immediately both Schaff and Nevin were charged by some of their contemporaries—both within and without the German Reformed Church—with having “Catholicizing tendencies.” In fact, the level of concern on this point was widespread—even Emanuel V. Gerhart—the great systematizer of the Mercersburg movement—was decidedly ambivalent about Nevin and Schaff on this matter for a time.²⁵ So, were the Mercersburg theologians champions of the Protestant Reformation, or were they crypto-Catholics, or were they something else again?

The urgency of this question is heightened by the fact that John Nevin himself dallied with the idea of conversion to Rome in the early 1850s—a period referred to by contemporaries as “Nevin’s dizziness.” And some associated with the Mercersburg movement, notably Mercersburg alumnus and prominent German Reformed pastor Daniel Gans, did in fact, as the saying goes, “swim the Tiber.” So was Mercersburg perhaps a gateway drug for Roman Catholicism?

We can approach this from another angle. The Reformation is depicted by some contemporary scholars (most of them Roman Catholic incidentally) as the progenitor of modernity with its expressive individualism, secularism, liberal democracy, and social leveling. Here we think, for example, of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* and Brad S. Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation*—both of which suggest that the Reformation had a host of unintended consequences that led to the contemporary modernity and post-modernity that some of us applaud and some of us have decided

²⁴ John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1846).

²⁵ See the nuanced discussion in Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., “Emanuel V. Gerhart: Apologist for the Mercersburg Theology,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 57/4 (1979): 494-497.

reservations about.²⁶ Viewed in this light, some of the Mercersburg thinkers (especially John Nevin) appear decidedly conservative and, yes, Catholic in their sensibilities regarding social hierarchy. Thus it is not at all surprising that Nathan O. Hatch in his *The Democratization of American Christianity* presents Mercersburg as a reaction against the historical process he chronicles. As Hatch puts it, Nevin and Schaff’s “belief in the church’s authority, stemming from and steeped in tradition and learning, did not comport with the free-wheeling marketplace of religious ideas of provincial America.”²⁷ So once more the question is posed: Is the Mercersburg impulse Protestant or Catholic in spirit?

In seeking to answer this question we will engage as test cases four areas often thought to be emblematic of the magisterial Protestant Reformation: the theology of the Word, the priesthood of all believers, justification by faith, and divine sovereignty. We will explore the continuities and discontinuities that Mercersburg evinces. Finally, we will seek to discern some lessons regarding the continuing significance of Mercersburg.

I. The Theology of the Word

The theology of the Word of God is rightly regarded as central to the magisterial Reformation. Luther and Calvin sought to recover the centrality of Scripture and its proclamation in the life of the church, and this recovery had at least three dimensions. First there is Scripture in its mediatorial aspect. Both Luther and Calvin were suspicious of those with *schwärmerisch* tendencies; that is, those enthusiasts who claimed the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Luther had to deal with the Zwickau Prophets, and he famously remarked that his Wittenberg colleague Andreas Karlstadt thought he had “swallowed the Holy Ghost, feathers and all.” Calvin opposed spiritual radicals such as Caspar Schwenckfeld on

²⁶ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

²⁷ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 165

similar grounds. The magisterial Reformation was convinced that God speaks through the Word.

Second, there is the centrality of the Word in the ministry of the church. The sacrament of the mass was no longer the “main event” of the worship service. Instead, the preaching of the Word assumes center stage. Calvin, for example, is quite insistent that the sacraments are secondary to the Word—they depend upon the Word for their identity and they are given by God as concessions to human weakness.²⁸

Third, there is the matter of interpretation. In contrast to the Roman Catholic tradition, which insisted on the role of the magisterium in interpretation and determining the parameters of the canon, the magisterial Reformers insisted that Scripture is self-authenticating and self-interpreting.

Well, how does Mercersburg stack up? With regard to the mediatorial aspect of Scripture, it is safe to say that Nevin and Schaff were not *schwärmerisch* “enthusiasts.” From *The Anxious Bench* onward they opposed the immediacy and excessive subjectivity of revivalism with the objectivities of the Church—especially Scripture, ministry, and the sacraments.

But now things get more complicated. There is pretty much a consensus that the written and preached Word is not as central for Mercersburg as it was for Luther and Calvin. Rather, it is the sacraments that are central. As Nevin put it, “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the central institutions of Christianity.”²⁹ This sacramental focus had implications for the place of the Word. Once again, John Nevin writes: “the sacraments as means for the application of redemption have a certain priority over the Word, which has power to reach us only as we stand in proper relation to God by the sacraments.”³⁰ Of course, this sacramental focus of Mercersburg cannot be properly understood apart from its deeply

²⁸ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.14.3.

²⁹ William H. Erb, *Dr. Nevin’s Theology: Based on Manuscript Class-Room Lectures* (Reading, PA: I. M. Beaver, 1913), 372.

³⁰ Erb, *Nevin’s Theology*, 285.

incarnational center—the written Word is important but subordinate to the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ.

But Nevin’s sacramental sensibility went deeper than the traditional Reformed focus on the means of grace. In fact, his conception of reality in general was profoundly sacramental. As Nevin told his students, “The whole constitution of the world is sacramental, as being not simply the sign of, but the actual form and presence of invisible things.”³¹ Here he approaches what contemporary Roman Catholic theologian David Tracy has called the “Catholic analogical imagination.” As Tracy puts it,

We literally reimagine reality as a new series of ordered possibilities; we then choose some central clue for the whole of reality—for Catholics that central clue to the whole—to the relationship between God and humanity, the individual and society—is found in what T. S. Eliot called the half-guessed, the gift—half-understood—incarnation as the secret of both God and humankind and the relationship of both church and cosmos as finally sacramental.³²

Tracy might as well be talking about Nevin!

Then there is the question of interpretation. We are fortunate to have William DiPuccio’s fine study of the Mercersburg hermeneutic,³³ but a few comments are in order here. It was one thing for Luther and Calvin to assert the principle of *Sola Scriptura* with Scripture as self-authenticating and self-interpreting in *their* context of robust ecclesiology and learned exegesis—both of which set fairly clear boundaries on interpretation. But when the notion of Scripture alone was imported into the context of American individualism and democratization, those boundaries became anything but clear. Rampant sectarianism was the result—something that Nevin excoriated in his essay “The Sect System.” Nevin and Schaff realized that truism of late modernity and post-

³¹ Erb, *Nevin’s Theology*, 373.

³² David Tracy, “The Catholic Analogical Imagination,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* (1977), 236.

³³ See William DiPuccio, *The Interior Sense of Scripture: The Sacred Hermeneutics of John W. Nevin* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998).

modernity: interpretation is inevitable—we don't simply read Scripture in a common-sense fashion and directly apprehend its meaning. We have to interpret; pre-understanding is important, and one of Nevin's more compelling points in "The Sect System" is that these groups, while claiming to just be reading the Bible, were actually reading Scripture through their own "theological goggles" (his term!), and the true authority of Scripture was being replaced by the "hierarchical despotism" of sectarian leaders.³⁴

But what sort of theological pre-understanding will enable people to read Scripture rightly? Mercersburg was convinced, rightly I think, that the Christian's union by faith and the Holy Spirit with Christ, a participation in the very divine-human life of Christ, is more fundamental than both doctrine and piety, and that faith precedes understanding.³⁵ Here, of course, Nevin and Schaff were tapping into that rich Augustinian and Anselmian tradition of Christian Platonism. If theology and exegesis are matters of *fides quaerens intellectum* ("faith seeking understanding") then theology and exegesis are to be done from within the circle of faith. And where is that circle of faith to be found? It is found in the creedal tradition of the Church, and especially in the Apostles' Creed!

Thus it might appear, if we follow Nevin in particular, that Mercersburg rather decisively subordinates the interpretation of Scripture to the tradition of the Church. But even here the situation is more complex. Philip Schaff certainly championed the indispensability of tradition, but he also contended that the *regula fidei* as expressed in the great creeds of the church is

not a part of the divine word separately from that which is written, but the contents of scripture itself as apprehended and settled by the church against heresies past and always new appearing; not an independent source of revelation, but

³⁴ John W. Nevin, "The Sect System," in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. and George H. Bricker (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1978), 144.

³⁵ See John W. Nevin, "Review of God in Christ" by Horace Bushnell, *Mercersburg Review* 1 (1849): 312; John W. Nevin, "The Apostles' Creed," *Mercersburg Review* 1 (1849): 207, 211, 345.

the one fountain of the written word, only rolling itself forward in the stream of church consciousness.³⁶

So, far from setting the tradition of the church over against Scripture, Schaff actually subordinates it to Scripture in a manner that sounds pretty authentically Protestant and Reformational!

On balance, then, with respect to the theology of the Word in the context of the question we have posed, Mercersburg was more Protestant than Catholic, and for reasons that make a good deal of sense in context. Nevin and Schaff were seeking to recover the sacramental dimension and healthy respect for tradition that had been a prominent part of the Reformation but largely lost in nineteenth-century America, and in order to do this they had to recover aspects of the Catholic past that had been jettisoned by later Protestant thinkers.

II. The Priesthood of All Believers

According to Martin Luther all Christians are priests through their union with Christ who is the great High Priest. Thus all Christians are to proclaim the Word of God and forgiveness to others, but for the purposes of order in the church some are set apart to ordained ministry. This ordained ministry is not understood as a category of priesthood separate from that of all Christians.³⁷

Calvin's position is similar. He writes: "For we who are defiled in ourselves, yet are priests in him, offer ourselves and our all to God, and freely enter the heavenly sanctuary that the sacrifice of prayers and praise that we bring may be acceptable and sweet-smelling before God."³⁸ And of course, both Calvin and Luther were particularly concerned to exclude the notion of a special priesthood offering the sacrifice of Christ anew in the mass.

But at this point in Protestant history the priesthood of all believers was not understood to imply a divine immediacy of grace,

³⁶ Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 116.

³⁷ See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 313-318.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.15.6.

as if Christians go directly to God without the mediation of the church and the means of grace. As Paul Althaus notes,

Luther never understands the priesthood of all believers merely in the “Protestant” sense of the Christian’s freedom to stand in a direct relationship to God without a human mediator. Rather, he constantly emphasizes the Christian’s evangelical authority to come before God on behalf of the brethren and also of the world. The universal priesthood expresses no religious individualism but its exact opposite, the reality of the congregation as a community.³⁹

By the nineteenth century, however, a significant shift had occurred. Evidence of this comes from a highly significant source—the Presbyterian B. B. Warfield, who compared what he termed “evangelical” and “sacerdotal” soteriologies in the following terms:

The exact point of difference between them turns on the question of whether God, by whose power alone salvation is wrought, saves men by dealing himself immediately with them as individuals, or only by establishing supernatural endowed instrumentalities in the world by means of which men may be saved. The issue concerns the immediacy of the saving operations of God: Does God save men by immediate operations of his grace upon their souls, or does he act upon them only through the medium of instrumentalities established for that purpose.⁴⁰

That this is coming from the flagship seminary of the Presbyterian Church says a good deal about American Protestantism. Needless to say, neither Luther nor Calvin would have spoken in such terms. For them grace is mediated—through union with Christ and through the means of grace—the Word and the sacraments—in the church.

³⁹ Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 314.

⁴⁰ B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 18. Here Warfield echoes themes earlier presented by his predecessor at Princeton Charles Hodge. See W. Bradford Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Press, 2009), 36-37.

Reasons for this shift are complex—having to do with the sociology of American Christianity, philosophical context, and theological developments in the Reformed tradition—and need not detain us here, but the contrast is indeed stark.

Where does Mercersburg fit in here? Mercersburg, of course, stoutly insisted on the mediation of Christ and the church as the body of Christ. The benefits of salvation are inseparable from Christ’s person and are received through the church’s means of grace, which communicate Christ himself. Rather than individual Christians having an unmediated experience of grace and then the aggregate of such people making up the church as a sort of “sand heap” (one of Nevin’s favorite metaphors)—and all this made possible by a sort of external transaction done by Christ in the past—a person becomes a Christian by being baptized into Christ and his church. As Nevin put it early in his time at Mercersburg (in *The Anxious Bench*):

Due regard is had to the idea of the Church as something more than a bare abstraction, the conception of an aggregate of parts mechanically brought together. It is apprehended rather as an organic life springing perpetually from the same ground, and identical with itself at every point. In this view the Church is truly the *mother* of all her children. They do not impart life to her, but she imparts life to them. Here again the general is left to go before the particular, and to condition all its manifestations. The Church is in no sense the product of individual Christianity . . . but individual Christianity is the product, always and entirely, of the Church as existing previously and only revealing its life in this way.⁴¹

⁴¹ John W. Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, 2nd ed., in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. and George H. Bricker (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1978), 110-111. See also John W. Nevin, "Catholic Unity," in James Hastings Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 40-41.

The contrast, I would submit, can scarcely be more stark! But we also encounter a wrinkle. Note that the contrast here is not so much between Catholicism and Protestantism as between the Protestantism of the magisterial Reformation, with which Mercersburg had considerable affinity, and popular nineteenth-century American Protestantism. And the core issue seems to have been, as Nevin intuited, Christological. The incarnation, the opponents of Mercersburg conceded, was necessary in order for Christ to pay the legal penalty for sin, but once that forensic exercise was over, the application of the benefits of salvation was a purely external affair, a business transaction if you will. Salvation was not “in Christ,” but rather on the basis of what Christ has done. But for Nevin and Schaff, salvation is only to be found in Christ, in his person as the second Adam and organic source of a new and redeemed humanity. Here, of course they were simply echoing Calvin and Luther. As Calvin famously wrote in that programmatic statement at the beginning of Book III of the *Institutes*, “First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.”⁴²

III. Justification by Faith

It is with good reason that we turn now to what Schaff terms the “material principle” of Protestantism—the doctrine of justification by faith—for it is closely connected in much more recent Protestant thinking with the notion of the priesthood of all believers and an immediatist view of grace and salvation. Charles Hodge, for example, declared in his 1845 review of Schaff’s *The Principle of Protestantism* that the doctrine of justification by faith is “our continued protest against the error of a mediating church or priesthood.”⁴³

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes*, III.1.1.

⁴³ Charles Hodge, “Schaff’s Protestantism,” *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 17 (1845): 627, quoted in Littlejohn, *Mercersburg Theology*, 36.

Philip Schaff's description of this doctrine in *The Principle of Protestantism* is a good place to start, and it is remarkable for its conventionally Protestant character. The doctrine is set in opposition to all Pelagian or semi-Pelagian self-righteousness (as reflected, e.g., in Roman Catholic synergism). The merit of Christ is the only ground of justification, and faith is the instrumental cause. Justification consists in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believer, and the faith that receives Christ involves not only assent but also heartfelt trust. All this is textbook Protestantism. The only mildly "creative" move here, in response to the objection that such justification is a legal fiction, is Schaff's viewing the decree of justification as a creative act by which the "principle of righteousness" (that is, Christ himself) is actualized in the believer.⁴⁴

Turning to John W. Nevin, the picture becomes more complex. In some contrast to Schaff, Nevin insisted that justification had been overemphasized in recent Protestantism, and he was clearly concerned about how some had taken this emphasis on justification in an antinomian direction. But Nevin's deeper concern was the abstraction of the doctrine from the persons involved. He was convinced that many in his day framed the doctrine in a completely extrinsic way. "The tendency," he told his students at Mercersburg, "is to over-emphasize the external side of the transaction and to ignore the internal or organic relation."⁴⁵ In other words, Nevin was deeply concerned that people were trying to understand justification without reference to the believer's union with Christ!

To be sure, there is much that is conventionally Protestant in Nevin. Justification is by faith and involves both forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. But certain factors in Nevin's thinking create dissonance with Reformational thought. First, he bought into the eighteenth and nineteenth-century moral-philosophy assumption that merit and demerit inhere in

⁴⁴ See Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 80-97.

⁴⁵ Erb, *Nevin's Theology*, 203.

persons and cannot be abstracted from personality.⁴⁶ By itself this was not a major problem, but he also believed that there was a precise parallel between hamartiological and soteriological imputation (ironically, Nevin and Hodge shared this conviction). Adam's offspring, according to Nevin, are accounted as sinners because they participate in his sinful condition, and likewise those united with Christ are accounted righteous because they participate in his righteousness.

The moral relations of Adam, and his moral character too, are made over to us at the same time. Our participation in the actual unrighteousness of his life, forms the ground of our participation in his guilt and liability to punishment. And in no other way, we affirm, can the idea of imputation be satisfactorily sustained in the case of the second Adam. The scriptures make the two cases, in this respect, fully parallel.⁴⁷

This is, to use seventeenth-century scholastic categories, mediate imputation (i.e., imputation through participation in a moral quality). In contrast, Luther and Calvin clearly affirmed the justification of the ungodly (recall Luther's *simul iustus et peccator*), what nineteenth-century theologians termed a "synthetic justification" (i.e., a justification not in accordance with the facts, and in contrast to an analytic justification that was in accordance with the actual facts). But Nevin speaks in terms of what is really a proleptic and analytic justification. God declares the sinner righteous because they are (or at least will be) righteous. Nevin writes in *The Mystical Presence*:

The judgment of God must ever be according to truth. He cannot reckon to anyone 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. . . . The law in this view would

⁴⁶ See Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 117.

⁴⁷ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 190-91. See also 166.

be itself a fiction only, and not the expression of a fact. But no such fiction, whether under the name of law or without it, can lie at the ground of a judgment entertained or pronounced by God.⁴⁸

Nevin also expanded the definition of faith to include works of evangelical obedience. Seeking to reconcile Paul and James, Nevin told his students: "There is no great difficulty in reconciling them, if we keep in view what Paul means by faith. He always takes it as a life, necessarily including other affections and graces, such as love and hope, as well as corresponding outward acts."⁴⁹ While there is Protestant precedent for this move (most notably in Jonathan Edwards and his successors⁵⁰), it does sound rather "Catholic."

Thus, Nevin (more than Schaff) stands in some tension with the magisterial Reformation on this crucial matter. In other words, Charles Hodge had some reason for concern, and it is no accident that the 1970s-era Pickwick Press anthologies of Nevin and Schaff respectively were entitled *Catholic and Reformed* and *Reformed and Catholic*.

IV. Divine Sovereignty

For our last test case we turn to the issue of divine sovereignty. It goes without saying, of course, that John Calvin was a staunch predestinarian, and that Reformed Orthodoxy followed Calvin on this.⁵¹ Less well known, perhaps, is the fact that Martin Luther was as well. Here we think particularly of Luther's critique of Erasmus in *The Bondage of the Will* and the programmatic distinction he makes between the hidden God of the decrees and the

⁴⁸ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 189.

⁴⁹ Erb, *Nevin's Theology*, 306.

⁵⁰ See William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008), 107-111, 124, 257-258.

⁵¹ See, e.g., John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Cambridge: James Clarke); John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defense of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius*, ed. A. N. S. Lane, trans. G. I. Davies (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

God revealed in Jesus Christ.⁵² The later Lutheran tradition, of course, softened the sharp polarities in Luther's thought on this issue—a process that began with Phillip Melancthon. Many Lutheran orthodox theologians make election dependent on divine foreknowledge of who will believe, and great emphasis is placed on the resistibility of grace as an explanation of why some are saved and not others.⁵³

Philip Schaff, though he knew the terms of the debate intimately, seems to have been more Lutheran on this matter and seeking a higher synthesis. He wrote in his *History of the Christian Church*:

Calvinism emphasizes divine sovereignty and free grace; Arminianism emphasizes human responsibility. The one restricts saving grace to the elect; the other extends it to all men on the condition of faith. Both are right in what they assert; both are wrong in what they deny. If one important truth is pressed to the exclusion of another truth of equal importance, it becomes an error, and loses its hold upon the conscience.⁵⁴

Nevin, on the other hand, was a scion of the Presbyterian Church, raised on the Westminster Standards. By training and background he was, as the saying goes, a metaphysical Calvinist. But in the course of his debate over the Lord's Supper with Charles Hodge of Princeton, Nevin concluded that Calvin's "abstract" doctrine of the decrees rendered the Incarnation, the atonement, and the sacraments

⁵² See Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1957). See also Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 274-286.

⁵³ See the compend of Lutheran Orthodox theologians on this topic in Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed. rev., trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 270-292.

⁵⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols., 3rd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), VIII: 815.

a charade. By 1848 Nevin had publicly and decisively broken with predestinarian Calvinism.⁵⁵

But there was still the question of continuity with the Reformation, and here the Mercersburg answer was ingenious. They appealed to what they took to be the distinctive tradition of the German Reformed Church as Melancthonian on the decrees and Calvinistic on the sacraments—ideas that were being trumpeted in Germany at this time by August Ebrard and Heinrich Heppe. Ebrard, for example, even took pains to present predestinarian Calvinism as a minority view within the larger Reformed tradition.⁵⁶

This “Heppe Thesis,” as it is sometimes called, was part of a broader historiographical discussion in Germany regarding how the Reformed tradition should be understood. More recent scholarship has tended to view the German Reformed tradition as more predestinarian than Ebrard and Heppe allowed, though conceding that the German Reformed emphasis has been more on the accomplishment and application of salvation in history than on eternal decrees.⁵⁷ It is one thing to note the influence of Melancthon; it is quite another to view him as the “father of the German Reformed tradition”! As Karl Barth ironically noted in his “Foreword” to Heppe’s *Reformed Dogmatics*, “Of course Heppe has his notable weaknesses. . . . On Heppe’s historical outlook we should note that according to him, wonderful to relate, not Calvin but the later Melancthon must have been the Father of Reformed

⁵⁵ See John W. Nevin, “Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper,” in John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*, ed. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1966), 372-373; “Hodge on the Ephesians,” *Mercersburg Review* 9 (1857), 46-83, 192-245.

⁵⁶ See B. C. Wolff, “German Reformed Dogmatics,” *Mercersburg Review* 9 (1857): 249-272; *Mercersburg Review* 10 (1858): 58-83 (a “free translation” of a portion of Ebrard’s *Christliche Dogmatik*).

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Lyle D. Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

theology.”⁵⁸ Despite these problems, the Heppes thesis did enable the Mercersburg theologians to carve out a meaningful (and to some degree legitimate) Reformational past that distinguished them from the metaphysical Calvinism of Princeton.

IV. Lessons to Be Learned

So, was Mercersburg Catholic or Protestant? A simple either/or answer is neither useful nor particularly interesting. On balance, Nevin and Schaff fall on the Protestant side. They were Protestant theologians—they used primarily Protestant categories; they taught at Protestant schools and were ordained by Protestant churches. But Nevin and Schaff drew on both Catholic and Protestant antecedents (and on other influences as well) in order to speak to their own nineteenth-century context. More interesting, I think, is the question of what lessons we can learn from Mercersburg. Let me tentatively suggest four areas where we can profit from Nevin and Schaff.

First, there is the issue of theological method. Here, of course, we do well to remember Jeffrey Stout’s comment that “Preoccupation with method is like clearing your throat: it can only go on for so long before you lose your audience.”⁵⁹ With that warning in mind, we will get this point out of the way as quickly as possible! I would submit that we find in Mercersburg a compelling integration of Scripture, fidelity to the best of the Christian tradition (including the Reformation), and critical philosophy done in a way that was profoundly contextual. It is no accident that Brian Gerrish’s *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* has a fine chapter on Nevin, and Gerrish makes this important point regarding continuity with the past that is crucial to our topic here:

[T]alk about a departure from the Reformation heritage during the [nineteenth] century contradicts the self-image of

⁵⁸ Karl Barth, “Foreword,” in Heinrich Heppes, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950), vii.

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 163.

those on whom the verdict falls. To a man, they thought of themselves not as rebels (as the neoorthodox were later to think of *themselves*), but as upholders of a tradition.⁶⁰

There are lessons here for both the right and the left in our contemporary context. The right needs to learn that theology is not mere repristination; it is not an exercise in historic preservation. In all honesty, that tends to be my own tradition's problem. The right also needs to learn that theology is not mere Biblicism and proof-texting that presupposes a common-sense, populist hermeneutic. Texts need to be interpreted. The Bible needs to be interpreted, and, I might add, the tradition needs to be interpreted. But the left needs to learn that theology is not the ideological backfilling of whatever social agendas are current today, and that meaningful, substantial continuity with the Christian past is essential if we are to take the task of Christian theology seriously. Theology worthy of the name did not begin with the Enlightenment!

Second, there is the importance of Mediation and Ecclesiology. As we know, Mercersburg was a churchly renaissance over against the ecclesially challenged low-church Protestantism of the day. And the fragmented character of much of American Protestantism today suggests that the Mercersburg ecclesiology is still relevant.

But this ecclesiological emphasis was not merely an aesthetic or nostalgic impulse (as some have seen the Oxford Movement). It was firmly rooted in a theology that was heavy on mediation; we have seen a number of examples of this here today. And of course, the ultimate mediation, or better Mediator, is Jesus Christ himself. Not only does this Mercersburg theme anticipate

⁶⁰ B. A. Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 2. See also B. A. Gerrish, "The Flesh of the Son of Man: John W. Nevin on the Church and the Eucharist," in *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 49-70.

some rich 20th century theology—T. F. Torrance comes to mind⁶¹—but this emphasis on mediation enabled the Mercersburg theologians at least to begin to transcend the traditional polarities of the soteriological debate between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Here we are painting with a broad brush, but we can generalize by saying that Catholicism has emphasized transformation of life while Protestantism has emphasized forensic justification. The Council of Trent defines justification primarily as a process of becoming righteous. Meanwhile, some Protestants have returned the favor by insisting that transformation of life has no relevance at all for one’s standing as righteous before God.

A striking recent example of this is Bruce McCormack of Princeton Theological Seminary. McCormack describes as the Protestant position the idea that God’s work in us cannot in any sense be the “basis of God’s forgiveness,” and he then takes both Luther and Calvin to task for their inconsistency with this—Luther for his emphasis on faith and Calvin for his sacramentology and emphasis on union with Christ!⁶² The tendency of hyper-Protestants, both in the nineteenth century and today, is to assume that there is a tension or contradiction between Christ *pro nobis* and Christ *in nobis*. Calvin and Luther rightly felt no such tension between the “Christ for us” and the “Christ in us,” and neither did Mercersburg.

This relates to the most important lesson I’ve learned from Mercersburg. This was an insight toward which they gestured, though the exegetical insights needed for a more complete solution to the problem awaited the twentieth century. If we try to relate justification and sanctification directly we set up a contest in which something has to give. There must be a third element in the equation—Christ himself. Only when Christ himself is the

⁶¹ See, e.g., William B. Evans, “Twin Sons of Different Mothers: The Remarkable Theological Convergence of John W. Nevin and Thomas F. Torrance,” *Haddington House Journal* 11 (2009): 155-173.

⁶² See Bruce L. McCormack, “What’s at Stake in the Current Debates over Justification: The Crisis of Protestantism in the West,” in Mark Husbards and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 81-117.

principle and source of salvation can both the forensic and the transformatory be given their proper due without collapsing one into the other.⁶³ Mediation is important.

And of course, mediation as Mercersburg understood it is also about incorporation into something larger than ourselves. We live in an age of, dare I say it, invidious individualism the likes of which Nevin and Schaff could scarcely have imagined. Charles Taylor aptly speaks of the “buffered self,” the self as isolated from any point of transcendence that might provide a sense of meaning and purpose.⁶⁴ The natural human tendency to be turned in on one’s self, *incurvatus in se* as Luther put it, has now been ideologically instantiated. And if one thing is clear to me at this point it is this—that the post-Enlightenment autonomous self *qua* self cannot sustain human dignity and purpose. We desperately need to be part of something larger than ourselves. We need to be incorporated. We need mediation.

Third, there is the centrality of Christ. As we have seen, the church is important for the Mercersburg theologians because Christ is central, and the church is his body. In fact, we’ve already explored some of the implications of this centrality, but I want to pursue an issue I alluded to at the beginning of this lecture—the implications of Christ for social ethics. As we noted earlier, Nathan Hatch has presented Mercersburg as standing in opposition to democratization, as hierarchical traditionalists throwing a spanner into the engine of American egalitarianism. And here an uncomfortable question is posed—was the social impulse of Mercersburg of a piece with European Roman Catholic traditionalists like Joseph de Maistre?

From what I can tell, Nevin remained a social hierarchicalist, a patrician snob, if you will. It was the Swiss-German Schaff who came to terms with the variegated character of American Christianity. He became a fervent advocate of the American separation of church and state, and was deeply involved in what has been called the “Evangelical United Front” with its

⁶³ On this, see Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 259-267.

⁶⁴ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 37-42.

voluntary societies devoted to various moralistic causes such as Sabbath observance and temperance. He finally embraced the revivalism of D. L. Moody, and he began to distinguish between invidious sects and denominations. In short, Schaff made his peace with American democracy, and I would argue that in doing so he was ultimately truer to the Christological center of Mercersburg. Another European visitor to America, Alexis de Tocqueville, articulates well the logic here:

All the great writers of antiquity were a part of the aristocracy of masters, or at least they saw that aristocracy as established without dispute before their eyes; their minds, after expanding in several directions, were therefore found limited in that one, and it was necessary that Jesus Christ come to earth to make it understood that all members of the human species are naturally alike and equal.⁶⁵

The final lesson of Mercersburg in its Catholic and Reformation context, I would suggest, is that the Reformation is not the final chapter. Here again, Schaff leads the way with his theory of historical development. Ever the optimist, Schaff pondered whether the denominational diversity of America would be instrumental in the emergence of a higher Christian synthesis. Schaff's Schelling-influenced eschatological vision of a religious future in which America would play a decisive role is evident in this quote from 1888:

God has great surprises in store. The Reformation is not by any means the last word He has spoken. We may confidently look and hope for something better than Romanism and Protestantism. And free America, where all the churches are commingling and rivalling with each other, may become the chief theatre of such a reunion of

⁶⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 413. The most complete study of Schaff's evolving interpretation of American Christianity is Stephen R. Graham, *Cosmos in the Chaos: Philip Schaff's Interpretation of Nineteenth-Century American Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

Christendom as will preserve every truly Christian and valuable element in the various types which it has assumed in the course of ages, and make them more effective than they were in their separation and antagonism. The denominational discords will be solved at last in the concord of Christ, the Lord and Saviour of all that love, worship, and follow Him.⁶⁶

We read this in light of subsequent history and we think, “That’s kind of naïve.” As the Christian center of gravity shifts further and further to the global south and to what we now call “world Christianity,” such America-centric suggestions sound at best parochial.

And yet there is also a salutary humility at work here. If Schaff was wrong on the details, he got the big picture right. Christians are called to an eschatological awareness that God continues to be at work. Brevard Childs aptly remarked regarding the Psalter, that great hymnal of the Reformed tradition: “However one explains it, the final form of the Psalter is highly eschatological in nature. It looks forward to the future and passionately yearns for its arrival.”⁶⁷ Heidelberg Catechism Q. 123 looks forward to “the full coming of thy kingdom, wherein thou shalt be all in all.” This biblical and confessional eschatological horizon should prevent idolatrous efforts to freeze history, and the history of theology, at a particular favored chapter.

Some of us will recall Francis Fukuyama’s argument that the end of the Cold War marks “the endpoint of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”⁶⁸ We theologians too face Fukuyamaesque temptations to announce the end of history, to think we have finally arrived. But Mercersburg reminds us that theology

⁶⁶ Philip Schaff, *Church and State in the United States* (New York, 1888), 83; quoted in George H. Shriver, *Philip Schaff: Christian Scholar and Ecumenical Prophet* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 41.

⁶⁷ Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 518.

⁶⁸ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *The National Interest* 16 (1989), 18.

worthy of the name must be a *theologia viatorum*, a pilgrim theology, a theology on the path.

Christ the True Vine

By Thomas D. Busteed
(Written in April of 2013
for a course in Christology
taught by Lee Barrett at LTS.)

The basic image/metaphor of Jesus in John 15:1-7 is Jesus as the true vine.

It is surprising to me how the image of Jesus as the true vine has become more comforting to me this past year. The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd in John 10:11-15, was my first choice for this project. Jesus as the Good Shepherd was and still is one of my favorite images of Jesus. I remember the old paintings in the Sunday School wing of my childhood church were depictions of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. I remember the dark blues and greens with Jesus's face seeming to be the painting's source of light as he held a sheep in his arms. When I think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, I feel comforted. Even John 10:16 has the comforting message of Jesus welcoming sheep from other sheep pens.

I never experienced this same comfort from the true vine image. The vine metaphor comes with a bit of an 'edge' to it. John 15:6 warns that if a branch does not remain in Jesus, it will wither, be thrown away, and be burned up in a fire. This traditionally has been the hang up for me. Finding myself in relationships with people who do not profess the Christian faith, I could not bear to think of most of the people I knew ending up in the 'fire.' I could not imagine that my Good Shepherd would choose to reject my friends. Also as a gay man, I felt rejected by the Christian church. This was one of the factors that led me, for a while, to profess Unitarian Universalism. It was not until I started reading John Williamson Nevin's *The Mystical Presence* in preparation for a sermon that I preached last year that the image of the true vine took on new meaning for me.

The new meaning for me of this image is best illuminated and expanded upon in the 17th century hymn "There in God's Garden," written by Király Imre von Pécselyi, translated into

English by Erik Routley in the 20th century.⁶⁹ Jesus is portrayed as “the Tree of Wisdom whose leaves hold forth the healing of the nations” (verse 1). Just as we are connected to the true vine in John 15:1-7, the second verse of the hymn describes humanity’s connection to Jesus, the tree, in the words “see where the tendrils of our human selfhood feed on its lifeblood.” John 15:4 CEB says “A branch can’t produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can’t produce fruit unless you remain in me.”

The human problem is that we often alienate ourselves from the source of life, the true vine which supplies all the nutrients we need in order to live and produce fruit. As long as we are connected to the true source of our life and being, we will be nourished and produce fruit. However, humanity has a tendency to not “remain” in the true vine and seek spiritual nourishment “outside” the true vine. To return to the expanded imagery in the hymn, Christ’s passion “offers in mercy healing, strength, and pardon” to those who “take it freely!” (verse 6). The branches of the tree (Christ) “reach to us in welcome” and calls us to “give me your sickness, give me all your sorrow...” in order that the true vine may give us blessing (verse 4). The true vine nourishes and provides for us so that we will produce fruit, but humanity is easily distracted and so walks away from true spiritual nourishment, replacing it with addictions and other limited sources of thrill and comfort.

The key shift in interpretation for me occurred when I realized that the point of this passage is not God rejecting humanity, but rather God welcoming humanity to partake of the gifts of the true vine. The tone is not meant to punish rebels, but rather to warn believers that if they think they can produce fruit on their own merit without the help and grace of God, they are walking away from the source of life itself.

It is unclear to me which doctrine of the atonement is best suggested by the image of Jesus as the true vine. The passage stresses the benefits of the atonement being able to flow into humanity from the true vine. In this sense, the Latin view of the

⁶⁹ See Hymn no. 342 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (Pew Edition)*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

atonement seems to fit best.⁷⁰ Christ's Passion atones for human sinfulness, and humanity receives the benefits of the atonement by virtue of being connected to the true vine. There are no demonic other-worldly powers mentioned in the passage of John 15:1-7 to be conquered. Rather, it seems Christ acts on our behalf, and by virtue of Christ's humanity we receive the benefits of Christ's life-force.

The Alexandrian doctrine of incarnation fits best with the image of Jesus as the true vine. The Alexandrian view stresses the unity of Christ's humanity and divinity. This unity constitutes humanity's connection with the benefits offered through Christ the true vine. The Antiochene view might work if one were to consider Christ's humanity to be that which constitutes the life-giving power of the true vine to the branches, but the problem is that the spiritual source of life is then limited to the humanity. Alexandrianism allows for more ambiguity in the interrelation between Christ's humanity and divinity, thus allowing conceptually the idea of divinity flowing through humanity to animate humanity.

In order for the benefits of the true vine to flow through the branches (humanity) to produce fruit, the ontological model of incarnation seems necessary. The ontological model in its concepts of natures and its emphasis on a state of being seems most capable of explaining how humanity receives the benefits of Christ. If humanity receives the benefits of Christ by "remaining" in Christ, then there must be something of Christ's very being that flows into us, just as the nutrients of the vine flow into the branches. Christ's benefits flow into humanity by the very nature of Christ's humanity. Without Christ's human nature, the metaphor of vine and branches loses some of its power. The branches are connected to the vine by virtue of their being of one plant, the key difference being that

⁷⁰ In Dr. Barrett's evaluation of this paper, he rightly questioned here: "But, is there any suggestion that the problem with humanity is guilt here? Isn't the problem lifelessness rather than guilt?" The Latin view implies 'guilt' or sin as being the problem that Christ's atonement remedies, thus putting humanity in right relationship with God. An alternative view could be the Classical or 'Greek' view of atonement in which Christ's resurrection overcomes death and evil, in this instance in the form of 'spiritual stagnation.' Thanks to Dr. Barrett for suggesting this alternative interpretation.

Christ's roots are in eternity and our nourishment comes only by way of the vine. Christ must truly be human in order for humanity to benefit just as the vine must be truly plant if the plant branches are to have any life.

To summarize, the image of the true vine suggests that the human problem is to not be connected to Christ's nourishing vine and thus receive the benefits of his atonement. This suggests a Latin view of atonement in which humanity benefits from what Christ has done on our behalf in the Passion.⁷¹ In order for this flowing of benefits into our humanity to take place, it suggests that Christ's nature is connected to our nature, suggesting an ontological model of the incarnation. In order for this 'flowing' between natures to be unified as in one plant, it suggests that Christ's humanity and divinity were unified, as was the doctrine of the Alexandrians.

One thing that still bothers me about the image of the true vine is this: it seems to suggest that God's grace is resistible. The passage suggests that it is possible for a branch to break away from the true vine. In this sense, the benefits of Christ are only available if one accepts the true vine.

But let me suggest a nuance in the passage. It seems that the original state of being, or the natural state of being for the branches in the passage, is that they come from the vine. We are not independent branches that have to accept Christ's true vine in order to receive the nutrients. We begin *in* the vine. Christ accepts us; that is the primal state. Only when we reject the vine do we become independent from the vine and die. So it seems that it is not up to us to accept Christ, since Christ has already accepted us, but rather it is up to us to NOT reject Christ in order to remain in Christ.

An altar call is not necessary to have Christ in your life. Rather, what is necessary is to stay in community with Christ and not walk away and reject Christ. This has major implications, I think, on how we view church and the sacraments. If my interpretation is correct, the benefits of the Lord's Supper are open to all who do not walk away from it. In fact, we are strengthened by the church and our perseverance to remain in it despite its flaws. It

⁷¹ See note no. 70

is spiritual suicide to reject Christ. But it is life to remain in Christ and Christ's church. The image of Christ as a true vine from which we can receive nourishment is a message of fact and invitation, not of rejection and isolation.

The question still remains in how my friends of other faiths may benefit from this passage. Perhaps they do not. Perhaps this true nourishment and benefit is only available to Christians. And yet I am inclined to think that God in Christ is a God whose branches reach to other nations in invitation and perhaps even reaches through their traditions to nourish them as well until one day all may know the True Vine face to face.

For now, I am content to interpret this passage as a statement of fact of our primordial relationship to the Divine rather than reading it, as I had before, as a decree of judgment. The issues raised by this passage are worth further study, especially in how to interpret this passage in relation to other faith traditions. There is something compelling in the image of a Christ who provides for and nourishes Christ's branches. There is something compelling also that what is required of us is simply to 'remain' in Christ. And yet it is this remaining that is sometimes the most difficult, especially when churches preach rejection instead of the primordial acceptance Christ has for Christ's own branches.

BOOK REVIEW

Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings *James R. Payton, Jr.*

(2010 IVP Academic Books)

By F. Christopher Anderson

It is the Fall of 2017. This year is the 500th Anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation in 1517. If you still have not read a book on the Reformation let me give you one recommendation.

Payton's book is about 260 pages long and it touches on twelve misconceptions most Christians (and non-Christians) have about the Reformation. The chapters range from about 15 pages to about 30 pages and they can be read separately.

Common mythologies about Luther and Calvin often teach that they offered the only calls for reform. The book reveals that the Reformation began "...in response to the oft-repeated call for reform which echoed down through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries." (23) Francis Schaeffer and others have popularized the mistaken view that there was "a sharp contrast between the Renaissance and the Reformation." (52 & 53) Payton states "It is no exaggeration to state that, aside from Luther himself, the leadership of the Reformation was in the hands of northern Christian humanists." (70)

It has been believed by many that Luther came to his insights immediately and the implications were recognized and acted on quickly. The truth is that Luther "...had inaugurated a movement he had not foreseen or planned and which he would not ultimately be able to control." (73) Though we credit the beginning of the Reformation to the 95 Theses, Justification by Faith is not clearly taught in that document! It took a while for Luther to understand the implications of what he was teaching.

There is a misunderstanding that there was a great unity about the Protestant Reformers. One of the vital differences between Luther's work and the work of Zwingli, Bucer and Oecolampadius was that Luther emphasized the individual because

of his personal experience as a monk and they emphasized the needs of the urban community because they were pastors of large cities.

The most jarring misunderstandings relate to what the reformers meant by *SOLA FIDE* and *SOLO SCRIPTURA* and what many preachers mean by them today! “For the Reformers, justification is by faith alone, but faith is never alone.” (131) The Reformers loved the tradition of the ancient church. They did not have the simplistic view that is popular today of “Scripture good, tradition bad.” (133) The Reformers consistently quoted the Church Fathers, especially Augustine.

Payton also states, “In the sixteenth century, *Anabaptist* came to refer to a wide range of nontraditional approaches to Christian teaching and practice.” (165) These include Swiss Anabaptists, Establishment Anabaptists, Militant Anabaptists, Mystical Anabaptists, Communitarian Anabaptists, Spiritualist Anabaptists and Apocalyptic Anabaptists. Menno Simons did not leave the Roman Catholic Church until 1536. His work was that of a reformer of a diverse movement that existed before he got involved.

Payton also has a chapter on the move from the Reformation to Protestant Scholasticism. “Whereas the Reformers spoke primarily to congregations, Protestant scholastics addressed students in classrooms.” (193)

One chapter asks the question “Was the Reformation a Success?” One chapter asks the question “Is the Reformation a Norm?” The last chapter is a must to read because it seeks to answer the question “Was the Reformation a Triumph or a Failure?”

The church was clearly in great need of renewal. The great doctrine of Justification by Faith did get taught and preached. In 2017 we have Lutheran, Catholic and Reformed theologians who largely agree on the doctrine of Justification. But Jesus Christ prayed that we may be one. That is another whole discussion.

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