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# THE NEW MERCERSBURG REVIEW

Journal of the Mercersburg Society

Number Two

Autumn 1986

THE NEW MERCERSBURG REVIEW  
Journal of the Mercersburg Society

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## EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

The reception of the first issue of The New Mercersburg Review has been gratifying. Requests for additional copies have come from a number of theological school libraries and at least three theological professors asked for enough copies for their classes.

This edition of the New Review contains the lectures presented at the 1986 Convocation of the Society held in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. 1986 marked the centennial of the death of John Williamson Nevin, the theologian of Mercersburg. Two of the lectures focused on two aspects of Nevin's life and work which to our knowledge have been neglected in the academic writings about the Mercersburg Theology: Nevin on Baptism and Nevin understood in the light of the political-cultural context of his time in American history. R. Howard Paine, one of the recognized scholars of the Mercersburg Movement, presented a biographical address on Nevin. Society President Howard G. Hageman's sermon at the celebration of the Holy Eucharist during the Convocation reminds us again that our President is one of the leading American preachers as well as a premier Mercersburg scholar.

We are especially pleased to publish Geoffrey Wainwright's Convocation lecture on "Trinitarian Worship." To say the least, Professor Wainwright's lecture was both stimulating and controversial. We believe it deserves wide consideration throughout the church.

One of the criticisms the Society sometimes receives is that it appears to take a scholarly bent at the expense of attention to contemporary issues before the church. Perhaps there is some merit to the criticism although a careful reading of the first two editions of the New Review might warrant a different conclusion. In any case, the Executive Committee has authorized a spring edition of the New Review, which will contain a review article on the new United Church of Christ's A Book of Worship and a paper on the ongoing Mercersburg tradition within that same denomination. The new hymnal of the Reformed Church in America will receive a critical review by a professional church musician. Our intention in publishing two issues each year is to devote the fall edition to Convocation papers and the spring edition to articles on contemporary concerns.

Benjamin Griffin  
Editor



## TRINITARIAN WORSHIP

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In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus declared: "The hour is coming and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in Truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him" (John 4:23). The hour is coming and now is. Some today would say that that hour has been and gone. Scarcely anyone has a good word for the Father. The Truth as it is in Jesus seems to many to be far too particularistic a basis on which to deal with modern science or other religions. When the Spirit is invoked, it is often to bless opinions and activities that have little to do with the virtues the Paraclete encouraged and enabled in the New Testament. As the old lady said after Vatican II: "These days the Holy Spirit is telling people to do a lot of things the Holy Ghost would never have allowed." It appears to me that liberal, and perhaps even moderate, Protestantism in North America, in particular, is in greater danger than ever of losing hold of the doctrine of the Trinity, which has been a touchstone of historic Christianity. To see what is at stake, it will be useful to return to the origins and deep structures of trinitarian doctrine. We shall discover that its roots are sunk in worship, and that it finds its most significant continuing expression in the liturgy.

A good place to begin will be the treatise of St. Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit. An accessible English translation was published by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press in 1980. Written around the year 373, Basil's work expounds and defends trinitarian worship and doctrine in face of Arian and Arianizing interpretations and attacks. It is the first fully systematic treatise to set forth the two complementary patterns of trinitarian devotion and understanding that have marked the Christian liturgy ever since. The argument centers on two pairs of Greek prepositions used in the formulation of praise to God: "Glory to the Father through (dia) the Son in (en) the Holy Spirit" and "Glory to the Father with (meta) the Son together with (syn) the Holy Spirit."

The first formulation appears to be the more ancient, and it was the more widely used in Basil's day. The Arians appealed to it, however, in an attempt to condemn the Nicenes out of their own mouths. This phrasing, it was alleged, implies a subordination of the Spirit and the Son to the Father, which is precisely what the Arians taught, to the point indeed of making the Son and the Spirit creatures of the Father. Basil of Caesarea undertook to defend the Orthodox meaning and use of the doxology with "through" and "in." He argued that all God's activity in creation, redemption and sanctification takes place "through the Son" and "in the Spirit." It was, therefore, appropriate that our grateful response should occur "in the Spirit" and reach the Father "through the Son." Thus our thanksgiving corresponds to God's dealings with the world, the divine "economy."

This "mediatorial" pattern of God's relation with us and our relations with God does not, however, imply that the Son and the Spirit are creatures or are in any way less than God. To the contrary. Following a procedure already advanced by St. Athanasius in his Letters to Serapion, Basil appeals

to the faith confessed at baptism. Baptism takes place "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Not only are the three there ranked together, but our salvation is a work of God, and its agents cannot be less than God. Only God can give participation in God. When, therefore, we think of God in very being, a "co-ordinated" form of doxology is appropriate. It corresponds to the three mutually indwelling persons. While Basil is not always persuasive in the patristic precedents he cites for his use of the "with" form of the doxology, he has made a fair systematic case for its matching the immanent life of God whom we know in the economy. Within a decade, the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople will not only reaffirm the Nicene faith in Jesus Christ as "Lord," "the only Son of the Father, eternally begotten of the Father, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father"; it will also confess the Holy Spirit as "Lord," and "Life-Giver," "who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified."

Having had St. Basil lay bare for us the deep structures of trinitarian faith and worship, we can now examine its New Testament origins. Its groundplan can be found there, as well as most of the building-blocks with which the Church would construct its developed and refined formulations in liturgy and doctrine. Here we can draw help from the important seventh chapter in the work of the Italian Benedictine Cipriano Vagaggini, The Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy.

In the New Testament Vagaggini finds a "way of communion between God and humankind," which can be described in the following circulatory fashion:

Every good gift comes to us from the Father, through the medium of Jesus Christ his incarnate Son, in the presence of the Holy Spirit; and likewise, it is in the presence of the Holy Spirit, through the medium of Jesus Christ the incarnate Son, that everything must return to the Father and be reunited to its end, the most blessed Trinity. This is the Christological-Trinitarian activity of the sacred history of salvation, the plan of God in the world. The whole structure of the liturgy presupposes this activity, without which the liturgy would be incomprehensible.

Christian worship, like the salvation it celebrates and advances, is summed up in the movement "from the father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit to the Father (a Patre, per Christum, in Spiritu Sancto, ad Patrem)." While the full cycle can rarely be found in single New Testament passages, there is an abundance of fragmentary arcs that allow us to divine the whole.

The Epistle to the Ephesians is particularly rich in this regard. There is, for example, the opening benediction (1:3-14):

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every Spiritual blessing.... In [Christ] you too have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed, and you have been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of [God's] glory.

Or the cultically flavored passage, 2:18-22:

Through [Christ] we both [Jews and Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling-place of God in the Spirit.

Or again, the doxology of 3:20-21:

Now to [God] who by the power at work within us [i.e. the Spirit, cf. verse 16] is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever.

Or very concisely, in Galatians 4:4-6:

When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption.... And because you are God's adopted children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "Abba! Father!"

It is also apparent that the Christians of the New Testament times had begun to draw conclusions from the work of Jesus Christ to his person. By the fifties, the apostle Paul was able to draw on an even earlier hymn for the prospect that at the name of Jesus every knee would bow, and every tongue confess that "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Philippians 2:5-11 there makes an astonishing echo to Isaiah 45, one of the most "monotheistic" passages in the Old Testament, and uses of Christ the name "Kyrios" by which the Greek version of the Old Testament designates Yahweh. The one whom Thomas acclaims as "My Lord and My God" (John 20:28) is the risen Jesus, "the Word made flesh" (1:14), who "was in the beginning with God" and "was God" and "through him were made all things" (1:1-2). By 2 Timothy 4:18 and 2 Peter 3:18 Christ is receiving doxology as Lord and Savior. And in the book of Revelation every creature addresses "to the one who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever" (5:13). In his Letter to Adelphius, Athanasius fully embraces, and indeed actively exploits, the implication that the worship of Christ would be idolatry, were Christ not truly God.

With the dubious exceptions of I Corinthians 6:19-20 and Philippians 3:3 (for Augustine's exegesis of these two texts, see my Doxology, pp. 91-93), there is no case in the New Testament where the Holy Spirit is an object of worship as distinct from an enabling medium. Yet we have seen the systematic logic of a move from agency to being. And there are notable examples in liturgical history for praise and prayer addressed specifically to the Holy Spirit. Hymns, in particular, range from the Byzantine Pentecostarion "Basileu ouranie" and the Golden Sequence "Veni, Sancte Spiritus," through a large batch of Wesleyan texts so addressed, to the most recent Pentecostalist choruses. There is a scriptural basis for this in the Fourth Gospel, when Christ speaks of "another Comforter," who comes from the Father at his request and accomplishes divine functions. Usually, it is "with the

Father and the Son together" that the Holy Spirit "is worshiped and glorified."

To sum up so far: we have seen how, in its origins and structure, trinitarian worship and doctrine is closely bound up with the nature of salvation: its source, its giving and reception, its celebration and enjoyment, its end. All of this implies, according to Christian faith, the one God who works tripersonally and is in very being tripersonal, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This deep structure has been transmitted in the official liturgies of the Church. It has always needed interpretation and has often been under threat. What, now, are the difficulties in our particular context?

At the outset I hinted at difficulties with the sufficiency and finality, and therefore the reality, of the Incarnation. Some Christians may be tempted to weaken here for the sake, at least in part, of external apologetic in face of other and shifting worldviews. But the most acutely felt internal difficulty in our time and place seems to concern the designation of the second and first persons of the Trinity as Son and Father, the latter being the sharpest problem of all. In efforts to avoid it, some are being led, perhaps involuntarily, away from the Trinity altogether. I shall suggest that here, too, it is the reality of the Incarnation that is at stake when the designation Father and Son is questioned. But let us for a moment isolate the problem of Father.

Objections to calling God Father are of three kinds. The first has a background in Freudian psychology. "God the Father" or "the Father God" would then be the projection, on to a cosmic or even transcendent screen, of early experiences or unresolved neuroses. On Freud's own terms, we should be in the presence of an illusion. The second kind of objection is related to the social and cultural situation. With the breakup of the patriarchal family, or perhaps even the family as such, there is difficulty in finding at the human end a reference point for the analogical attribution of Fatherhood to God. The third kind of criticism is the most biting of those expressed from within the Church. It alleges that Father as a divine name is a reflection and buttress of sexist male dominance among humankind and even in the Church. What can be replied on each of these three counts?

If taken strictly, the projectionist interpretation will, after the manner already of Feuerbach, reduce all theology to anthropology; the position cannot be refuted on terms acceptable to such of its proponents, but such proponents have in fact stepped outside historic Christianity. When it is advanced in a more benign form, the position is compatible with the view that the God who loves humankind accommodates to our psychological processes. Yet there is always the danger that we shall idolatrously exchange the Creator for the creature (cf. Rom. 1:18-25). Our "images" of God must be permanently open to correction by God's own self-revelation. But that will bring us back precisely to the Incarnation, which I shall treat again presently.

With regard to our social and cultural situation today, there is (I think) an interesting piece of counter-evidence in the fact that several popular television series find it possible and desirable to present families, and even fathers, in a positive, indeed affectionate light; and that a leading comedian, Bill Cosby, can write a sympathetic bestseller under the title Fatherhood. Theologically, it is in any case important to

know which end of an analogy is determinative. According to Ephesians 3:14-15, it is the divine Father from whom every earthly fatherhood is named. The God revealed by Jesus is the corrective norm for every human father. The Incarnation again!

In the matter of sexism, I have no wish to support the oppression of any group of Christians, or indeed human beings at all, by any other. On the contrary. The injunction for those who would be followers of Christ is to mutual deference and service (e.g. Mark 10:42-45). But sympathy for some aspects of a cause, as with the position of women in society and in the Church, is no reason for acquiescence in other tendencies of a movement that are dangerous, or even erroneous, but are not necessarily intrinsic to the cause. Proposals for linguistic change that threaten trinitarian worship and doctrine are to be resisted. Let me also state carefully the arguments for retaining the trinitarian name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Feminist theologians who seek change in the divine name often stress the metaphorical character of human speech in reference to God. Now metaphor is not a simple category, any more than the literal is. It might be better to see metaphorical and literal as rough designations for ranges on a linguistic continuum. To this question I shall return. But even supposing that all human God-talk were somehow metaphorical, it would not necessarily follow that all metaphors were equally appropriate or authorized or that they all functioned in the same way. We might have reason for holding that some metaphors were not exchangeable but rather indispensable and performed special functions.

Among the wide range of metaphorical language used with divine reference in the Scriptures are the following similes:

Thus says the Lord;  
Behold, I will extend prosperity to  
[Jerusalem] like a river,  
and the wealth of the nations like an  
overflowing stream;  
and you shall suck, you shall be carried  
upon her hip,  
and dandled upon her knees.  
As one whom his mother comforts,  
so I will comfort you;  
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.  
(Isaiah 66:12-13)

Jesus said:  
O Jerusalem, Jerusalem....  
How often would I have gathered your children  
together as a hen gathers her brood under  
her wings, and you would not!  
(Matthew 23:27)

It is in accord with those texts that Julian of Norwich, when speaking of the maternal characteristics of God manifested in Christ, should have in mind the attitudes and acts of the Godhead as such towards us--"our Mother." Julian does not use Mother to designate the relations of the trinitarian persons among themselves. They remain Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Psalm 103:13 employs the following simile:

As a father pities his children,  
so the Lord pities those who fear him.

Some of the language of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount may remain in the same range of metaphor, as when he refers to the divine care for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field and argues a fortiori for the tender loving care of "your heavenly Father" towards his listeners. The fact that the hymn "Veni, Sancte Spiritus" can call the Holy Spirit also "father of the poor" suggests that paternal care is an attitude of the whole Godhead as such towards us.

In these last cases we have seen comparisons drawn from positive human experience -- whether of motherhood or fatherhood -- to illustrate God's attitudes toward the world and people. But we have not yet reached the question of the trinitarian name. Here we need to look at the Epistles and, above all, the Gospels, for the Father-Son relationship. It quickly becomes obvious that, if we are dealing with a metaphor, it is a highly privileged one. If a distinction between the metaphorical and the literal is to be maintained, I would hold that we have now moved toward the literal end of the scale. Better still, in this case of Father and Son we have to do with primary language. Let us examine the key evidence.

Joachim Jeremias has highlighted the significance of Jesus' address to God as "Abba." While the uniqueness of this use may be hard to prove, it is a striking characteristic of Jesus that he should address his prayers by this intimate term that expresses both affection and respect when used from a child to its father. The aramaic word is transliterated at Mark 14:36, and we may suppose it to lie behind the Greek "Pater" when this occurs in accounts of Jesus praying in every strand of the gospel tradition. Jesus appears to have chosen this as the most appropriate way of expressing his relationship to the one who sent him and with whom he stays in constant touch (cf. John 11:41-42). The implications of that for Jesus' own identity are brought out in, for instance, Matthew 11:25-27:

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him...."

The Word incarnate can define language. In this context, Father and Son mean who the first two persons of the Trinity are and what the relation between them is. It is the divine ontology that sets the meaning of the terms, not an already established meaning of the terms that dictates the divine being. The content of the Father-Son relationship, when expressed and lived out in the terms of the Incarnation, is to be discerned from the significant words and deeds of Jesus and the events of his life, death and resurrection.

We cannot know "from the inside" the relationships among the

trinitarian persons. The best hints provided in Scripture are those of a mutual indwelling which does not exclude the first person being what the Cappadocians would call "the fount of deity." The relationships are in any case such that, when they are turned "ad extra," the Son can reveal the Father:

Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?" (John 14:8-10)

No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (John 1:18)

The self-revelation of God in Christ becomes determinative, Christians believe, for all our understanding of God and of God's relation to the world and to us, and consequently of our proper response to God and of proper intra-human relationships.

In sum, it seems to me that the trinitarian name of God is given to us with Jesus' address to "Abba, Father," his self-understanding and career as "the Son," and his promise of the Holy Spirit. Christian reflection upon the divine self-revelation and the experience of salvation it brought led to the conclusion of an eternal divine Tri-unity. Classical Christian worship has therefore constantly followed the structure expressed in the two complementary formulations -- mediatorial and co-ordinated -- expounded and defended by Basil. And it has normatively employed the given name of the one God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- whenever the Trinity has been solemnly invoked. Thus the historic identity of the Christian faith is at stake if that structure is obscured or the best name we have is abandoned. It is vital that the structure and the name be maintained at such nodal points as the following:

- the baptismal questions ("Do you believe in...?")  
and declaration ("I baptize you in...");
- the ecumenical creeds (Apostolic and Nicene);
- the eucharistic prayer;
- ordination to the ministry;
- the solemn benediction ("The blessing of God almighty,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit....").

The same pattern is found in familiar texts that have commended themselves down the centuries: the Greater Gloria ("Glory be to God on high..."), the Lesser Gloria ("Gloria Patri..."), the Te Deum, and so on. The best hymn writers observe it, as in Charles Wesley's

Father of everlasting grace,  
Thy goodness and thy truth we praise,  
Thy goodness and thy truth we prove;  
Thou hast, in honor of thy Son,  
The gift unspeakable sent down,  
The Spirit of life, and power, and love.

Send us the Spirit of thy Son  
To make the depths of Godhead known,  
To make us share the life divine....

So fundamental is the pattern that it is natural for it to pervade all Christian worship. It is important that it continue to mark new compositions and extempore prayer. Otherwise the older examples would risk being treated as fossils.

The trinitarian name and doctrine is precisely not an abstract formula. It belongs to a living context. It must be kept firmly attached to the historical revelation through the telling and retelling of the story recounted in Scripture. It can thus carry with it all the associations of the God who has said and done such wonderful things and has received the praises of the people in such a rich abundance of language. The name and the doctrine need exposition in preaching and teaching. Further reflection may be needed to clarify its use, as took place, for instance, already at the Council of Nicea: "eternally begotten of the Father," "begotten, not made," "being of one substance with the Father."

This may be the place, however, to point out some tracks that would be false even if they were pursued with a view to explicating trinitarian doctrine, let alone replacing the triune name altogether (as some are suggesting). For example: "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer" is either the listing of three activities towards the world on the part of an otherwise undifferentiated Godhead (a kind of sabellianism) or else runs the risk of dividing the Godhead in a marcionite way. It is true that the tradition knows the careful and limited use of a principle of "appropriation," as in the Catechism of the Book of Common Prayer:

First I learn to believe in God the Father,  
who hath made me, and all the world.

Secondly, in God the Son, who hath redeemed me,  
and all mankind.

Thirdly, in God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me,  
and all the elect people of God.

But that is possible only in the context of a strong doctrine of the distinction, relations, and mutual coinherence of the three persons in the one God. And such a doctrine is based precisely on the given name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Or again, some are now speaking of "the Creator, the Christ, and the Spirit." That sounds as if Christ and the Holy Spirit were creatures; and Arianism, as Athanasius and Basil argued, forfeits our salvation, since only God can save.

So much is at stake in the matter of trinitarian worship that I have felt it necessary to give a fairly firm account of the traditional doctrine, and even at times to make a polemical point or two. But I would like to end on a more directly devotional note. I invite you to contemplate one of the most famous icons in Eastern Orthodoxy. Andrei Rublev depicts the persons of the Trinity in the guise of the three visitors to Abraham and Sara by the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18). The rhythm of the picture "folds" the three figures into one another in such a way as to suggest the mutual indwelling of the three divine persons in the one Godhead. Various details indicate that the figure we see on the left is the Father, the central figure is the

Son, and the figure on our right is the Holy Spirit. Through a characteristic use of inverse perspective, the icon "reaches out" toward the beholder, who can thus be "included" in the scene. Salvation is to be drawn, in a way appropriate to creatures, into the very life of God, to be given by the graciousness of God a share in the communion of the divine persons. The sacramental sign of the beginning of that process is baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the eucharist, the Holy Spirit touches us and the bread and wine so that we may receive the body and blood of Christ and so be included in the Son's self-gift to the Father. To the one God we cry "Holy, holy, holy...."



## JOHN NEVIN: THE MAN

R. Howard Paine  
Pastor, St. Thomas Reformed Church  
Reading, Pennsylvania

John Williamson Nevin arrived in Mercersburg in the spring of 1840 to assume the chair of Professor of Theology in the Theological Seminary of the German Reformed Church. One year later he was so deeply immersed in the life of his adopted denomination that he took a strong leadership role in the planning for the Centenary Celebration of the roots of the German Reformed in this country. To the fund which was established for the strengthening and support of its institutions he and his family gave \$1,000.00, the largest single gift contributed to the cause. This very brief glimpse into what might be counted as a rather minor piece of trivia from the life of one whom we honor here this week serves, nevertheless, to give us some true measure of the stature of the man.

John Nevin was a person of deep and abiding loyalties. He came to Mercersburg only because he was convinced that he would be able to continue there as a theologian within the branch of the church in whose bosom he had been reared. Presbyterians among whom he grew up and was reared and the German Reformed who were adopting him were of one and the same family. Westminster and Heidelberg were a closely bonded axis, as he saw it. He was not skittering about from one sect to another in vagabond fashion.

Nevin was a very intense person who threw himself completely into whatever enterprise he became involved in. Several times in his life he suffered from impaired health as a result of the exhaustion brought upon himself through the magnitude of his labors or the degree of his involvement. In his willingness to assume ever increasing teaching loads during his days as a professor at college and seminary he not only identified as a man of encyclopedic intellectual capacities but also as a stalwart supporter of the contention that the curriculum of a school should not be limited by the few people on its faculty. In the controversies which were invited by his writings on theology and worship he maintained his positions with determination and valor to such an extent that any contemporary discussions in these fields within the United Church of Christ are still obliged to deal with his propositions.

Although remembered for a certain kind of Olympian loftiness of bearing and aloofness of spirit, this man Nevin has still been characterized in the final count as a person of generous nature, compassionate understanding, and deeply personal piety which always lay so near to the surface that it was frequently there to manifest itself at the most surprising moments. Although it would be a distortion to characterize him as a wit, his sense of humor often came through in situations which were always treasured moments for his students.

The man whose thought and leadership in the church we honor was born near Shippensburg, Franklin County, Pennsylvania, on Sunday, February 20, 1803. His ancestry was Scots-Irish and, therefore, Presbyterian. John Williamson were family names. John was the name of his father, and Williamson was the maiden name of his paternal great grandmother. The Nevins were a distinguished family numbering among its members physicians, lawyers, authors, merchants and Presbyterian divines. John, our subject's father,

was a graduate of Dickinson College, class of 1795, and classmate of Roger B. Taney, afterwards Chief Justice of the United States. Although he chose to take up farming as his profession, he continued with intellectual pursuits, and became a trustee of Dickinson College in 1827. At the time of his death two years later his fellow citizens had convinced him to run for Congress because of his standing in the community.

John Nevin, the father, was what was known as a "Latin Farmer," one who could teach his sons Latin, Greek, and other branches of a higher education. Under this influence John Williamson early in life showed an aptitude for things scholarly. By the time he was fourteen he was enrolled as a freshman at Union College in Schenectady, New York. This was probably a mistake for a number of reasons. Young Nevin was the youngest and smallest of his class and never caught up in his development even by the time of his graduation. The drawing attraction for Union College was its president, Dr. Eliphalet Nott, a celebrated personage who was probably better at keeping alive his personal fame than in administering a viable institution.

While at Union College Nevin became involved in a "revival of religion," an experience which he was not prepared to handle, but in which he became immersed just the same because of his natural tendencies to become involved in whatever he was engaged in to the fullest. This was, of course, his first engagement with a manipulative brand of peity with which he took such strong issue in The Anxious Bench, the first of his books to receive widespread attention and acclaim.

By the time that Nevin reached graduation from college he had attained distinction in his studies, but he was burned out physically and emotionally. James I Good, that revisionist historian of the Reformed Church, never any great admirer of Nevin, lit on this set of circumstances as evidence that Nevin was fundamentally unstable, but I would prefer to aver that his burnout was the result of his virtues rather than his vices. At any rate, Nevin returned to his father's farm where he spent the next two years in agrarian pursuits, regaining his health and sorting out his goals.

In 1823, at the age of 20, Nevin matriculated at Princeton Seminary, having determined that he should prepare for the Christian ministry. While there he came under the considerable influence of Dr. Charles Hodge, Professor of Oriental and Biblical Literature. When Dr. Hodge invited him to be his replacement for two years as an assistant professor while Hodge was engaged in advanced studies in Europe, Nevin felt amply rewarded for his arduous years as a serious student. Also, as time went along, Nevin became more aware that his ministry would probably be in the area of teaching rather than the pastorate, and this opportunity to replace Hodge for a time was very attractive. It was also during this time that Nevin authored his first book, Biblical Antiquities, indicating thereby another thrust which his ministry would be taking in employing the pen as a means of communicating his advancing thought.

Completing his work at Princeton in 1828, Nevin was being named as the proper person to assume the chair of Biblical Literature in the new Theological Seminary which the Presbyterian General Assembly was about to establish in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Until the actual opening in 1830 Nevin was licensed to preach by the Carlisle Presbytery and was engaged in supply work in the area around his parents' home. During these months he was again troubled with ill health. He also suffered a tragedy in the loss of his

father who had been his wise counsellor on so many occasions throughout his formative years.

The ten years which he spent at Western Theological Seminary were troubling ones for him in a number of respects. When he went there there were no buildings, no endowment, few students and a faculty which kept changing as one after another of the professors became discouraged and left. He did find opportunity to continue with his writing, and this period could be characterized as one in which he took up with a number of social causes such as the abolition of slavery and the proper observance of the Sabbath. He was continually distressed by the controversy between the New and Old Light Presbyterians, but his loyalties remained largely with the Old as determined already by his association from Princeton days.

He did enter, in this time, into a state of great happiness for himself by marrying, on New Year's Day of 1835, Miss Martha Jenkins, second daughter of the Hon. Robert Jenkins, the well-known iron-master of Windsor Place, located at Churchtown, Carnaervron Township, Lancaster County. Out of this union there were to come eight children, five of whom lived to adulthood and to careers of distinction in their chosen walks. Also, we might note in passing that Nevin found himself included in a family of some considerable wealth which could help to explain that sizable gift to the Centenary Fund to which I have already made reference.

James I. Good makes quite a bit of his contention that Nevin was more than ready to leave Allegheny when the call came from mercersburg, a contention which it might be difficult for us to dispute. Nevertheless, the thing that should engage our interest here is that this man saw such great possibilities in a move which on first glance might not have appeared to be in any way an improvement for him. Mercersburg, too, was a struggling enterprise, short on colleagues and on cash. Nevin did find here, however, a valued mentor in the person of Prof. Frederick Augustus Rauch, a man credited with introducing American philosophical circles to the Hegelian School, and a man who did much within the one short year that he lived beyond the time that Nevin was associated with him to expand the mind of his younger colleague.

Nevin was called to Mercersburg in 1840 as Professor of Theology. In 1841, he became President of Marshall College upon the death of Dr. Rauch, a position which he held without additional pay until 1853 when the college moved to Lancaster.

During those years Nevin not only carried the double or even triple load of professor in college and seminary as well as president of the college, but he also wrote prolifically on subjects of theology and church history both in books and in articles for the Mercersburg Review which he was instrumental in inaugurating. It was also during this period that Professor Philip Schaff came to Mercersburg to help form what was to be one of the most distinguished team of scholars and theologians that was anywhere to be found in America. Their ideas of a church that is catholic and apostolic, sacramental and organic, brought them together and enabled them to hold firm in the face of at times brutal controversy, always pointing to higher ground than that in contention under the dominion of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church. Nevin was far in advance of his time in his insistence that due place be given to tradition in the Protestant economy, and he continued to insist that the Apostles' Creed is fundamental to all of

our understanding of the Word of God and determinative of all that shapes the life of the Church.

To read the writings of Nevin is to find one's self in the company of a man who was engaged in continuous controversy. He had little kind to say for the sect mentality which he characterized under the general classification of "Puritanism." There were those who said that he was splitting the church. He began with a christology and ended up with a sacramental approach to worship which revolutionized the liturgical life of the German Reformed Church. He took on Hodge, his old teacher, on the matter of the true presence of Christ in the Sacrament, and held out for his ideas of historical development in the church against Brownson, the convert to the Roman Church who denied his roots completely.

Nevin's detractors would have liked to say that he was a controversial figure who was in contention and disagreement with everyone, but his beautiful relationship with Rauch and Schaff, both men of the highest scholarship, indicates otherwise.

When the college moved to Lancaster Nevin went into retirement. He moved to Carlisle in 1854, but before long felt that he belonged closer to the academic center of his adopted faith. And so he moved back to Lancaster for one year in 1855, and from there to Windsor Place where he spent two years in settling up his mother-in-law's estate. Then back to Lancaster where he and his wife built Carnaervron Place on a tract of fifteen acres along the Columbia Pike. There he lived and took up again with farming for a time, but his wife realized that he needed an outlet for his intellect. At her urging and invitation of the College he lectured on the "Philosophy and Science of History" from 1861 to 1866.

In 1866 the college prevailed upon Dr. Nevin a second time to become its President, and this time he accepted. There followed a period of material growth supported by funds raised within the church in spite of the turmoil over the liturgical movement with which Nevin was so strongly identified. Numerous young professors were added to the faculty to begin what became in many instances illustrious academic careers. One very encouraging development during this time was the removal to Lancaster from Mercersburg of the Theological Seminary and the resumption of a closer relationship between these two institutions. Also worthy of note was the organization of a Reformed congregation for the college community in 1865. This congregation met in the college chapel and had as its pastor Dr. Nevin. The name of the congregation was St. Stephen's Church. During the years of planning for this, Dr. Nevin had been working with his neighbor and friend, former President James Buchanan, instructing him in the Heidelberg Catechism. Buchanan finally decided that he could wait no longer to make his commitment to Christ and so Nevin encouraged him to join the Presbyterian Church in the city, the spiritual home of Buchanan's forbears and, of course, of Nevin's too.

John Williamson Nevin retired a final time in 1876 but he continued to study and to offer his counsel to the church until his death at the age of 83 in 1886.

Funeral services were held in the college chapel. Burial was made in the Woodward Hill Cemetery on an elevated spot commanding a view of the city and and County of Lancaster.

When Dr. Theodore Appel wrote the Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin he invited Professor Richard C. Schiedt of the college faculty to write a latin elegy. Among the lines of this literary tribute we read these words:

We acknowledge that we all owe to thee and to thy genious all things which piety and love suggests.

The school of Mercersburg, the Athens of the mountains, is witness. Your disciples, the glory of a new race, are witnesses.

Thou, unfolding the hidden truths of God, didst so teach that one could rejoice for being enriched by a pure mind and faith.

Thou was an illustrious critic and author, excelling in acumen and in the wonderful quickness of thy judgment.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was neither vain ambition nor unholy zeal of opinion nor pride in his exalted mind.

But circumspect virtue and candor more beautiful than the brightest flower, and childlike faith and piety.

\* \* \* \* \*

Good rector, thou hast saved the vessel from the mad waves when false piety threatened it with destruction.

And that thy disciples might also know Christ thou didst take upon thyself a great burden of long labor.

For He, the Father Almighty, and the Son, the bright image of the Father . . . by inspiration ruled your pure heart.

## NEVIN'S LIFE AND WORK IN POLITICAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT

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A central theme of the Reformed faith, and one especially impressed upon me in my exposure to the Dutch Neo-Calvinist wing of that tradition, is that religion involves all of life or that all of life is religious. Christianity in this view does not entail just the redemption of individual souls or a particular behavioral or doctrinal code but must have a redemptive mission in all areas of society and culture. Correlatively, all forms of social action and cultural construction are seen as growing out of a religious commitment, Christian or otherwise, implicit or professed; and a critique of these commitments by a Christian standard is often taken as the first step of the cultural mission.

I think that with the proper qualifiers, especially in defining the term "religion," this view holds true and offers a valuable approach for interpreting Christianity and socio-cultural complexes alike. But turnabout is fair play. If Christianity works in all other phases of life, these work in and upon Christianity too. It is safe--and necessary--to say that history offers no example of an unacculturated Christianity, a pure, definitive realization of the faith as it "ought to be" or, in ideal, is. All God's children have shoes, but none of these, yet, have been the perfect sandals of the Master. To understand a particular type or instance of Christianity, then, we need to identify its social location, the philosophical frame it has assumed, the cultural allegiances and political correlations it has made--in short, the whole network of (strictly speaking) extra-theological and -cultic forces that have impinged upon the faith to help give it the shape or particular embodiment it has in a given time and place. This approach need not and must not be reductive, arguing that religious belief or behavior is "really" an expression of some "more basic" sociological, psychological, or cultural dynamic. Rather, the issue is one of interplay between an authentic though not autonomous religious tradition and its socio-cultural context, a context it can shape as well as reflect, act upon as well as react to.

I would like to examine the life and work of John W. Nevin in such a context, particularly in political context. I choose politics because 1) in the crucial period of Nevin's career, 1835-55 (equated in this paper with the "antebellum era"), American Christianity had more substantial and turbulent interchange with this sector of national life than with any other; 2) because politics in this era was so deeply and explicitly involved with cultural issues that also lay beneath much of Nevin's theological work; and 3) because the religion-politics interchange is so obvious a concern of our own times that we might well investigate Nevin's example to see what instruction and warning it offers us. As religious historians we can also thus repay a favor rendered us by political historians of late. Nothing has so revived and integrated the study of antebellum American politics over the past twenty years as the rise of the "ethnocultural" school with its attention to the divergent religious loyalties of the time and the ways these affected public debate and voting behavior.<sup>1</sup> If political history has been refreshed by being put in religious context, perhaps religious history might be newly unpacked by being studied in a political light. I believe

this does happen in the case of Nevin. Viewed over against the political patterns--and especially the political-cultural patterns--of his time, his theology exhibits another dimension than those heretofore explored, a fuller range of meanings and implications. A political contextualization brings out a hidden agenda and burden in Nevin's work, hidden not just by him but by our distance from him; and offers perhaps a clear index to its merits and difficulties.

It can immediately be objected that this procedure is abusive, asking of Nevin's work questions he did not propose to answer, putting it to purposes foreign to his intention. After all, did not Nevin scrupulously avoid socio-political comment both in his creative Mercersburg period and in the years afterward in Lancaster? And we must admit that such abuses can occur: recall, for instance, some of the speculative flights in Perry Miller's biography of Jonathan Edwards. But the approach is not inherently abusive; it simply requires careful claims and the persistent recognition of what the subject's declared purposes were. Even so, we can hardly help seeing that Nevin did have political connections throughout his life. His journalistic work in Pittsburgh in the 1830s hit head-on the issues of slavery and temperance which were central to the politics of the whole era. His publications at Mercersburg in the late 1840s and early '50s defended Catholicism and immigration in an aura of the most intense Protestant nativist demonstration in American history, a demonstration that took form also in a political party (the American or Know Nothing party) of crucial weight in various states. And we should recall that in the 1860s, as the Civil War raged uncomfortably close to Lancaster, this ex-President of Marshall College frequently had in his congregation and as conversation partner in his parlor his neighbor, the ex-President of the United States, James Buchanan. Indeed, Buchanan's entire career can be seen as bracketed by a Nevin connection: it began with the Jenkins family of Windsor Forge among his legal clientele and friends, from which <sup>2</sup>clan Nevin took a wife; and it ended with Nevin preaching his funeral sermon.

Besides such details from his life, we can find enough in Nevin's work to justify our political approach. In no less than his inaugural address at Mercersburg Seminary, Nevin claimed primary power for "the Christian Ministry"

among all the arrangements on which the welfare of life...  
is found to depend. No other [institution] enters so  
deeply into the inward moral economy of society; none  
links itself more vitally with all the radical interests  
of the individual and all the primary necessities of the  
State.

A little later Nevin explicitly vaunted the pulpit over politics ("the Senate chamber"), but his recognition that religion had something to do with politics would seem clear enough.<sup>3</sup> Ten years later the claim of politics--and every other dimension of life--for the redemptive purposes of Christianity stood out sharply in Nevin's remarkable article on "Catholicity." Recalling his earlier critique of revivalism, Nevin declared that Christianity "can never possibly be satisfied with the object of a simply numerical salvation, to be accomplished in favor of a certain number of individual men" secured from "the wrath to come" in an "outward," "mechanical" conversion event. Rather God's redemption would entail the "renovation also of the earth in its natural form," "the round and full symmetrical cosmos of humanity;" "we must look beyond the merely individual

life as such to the moral organization of society, in which alone it can ever be found real and complete." That organization included "certain orders and spheres of moral existence": "the family for instance and the state, with the various domestic and civil relations that grow out of them;" also art, science, business and trade. "No interest or sphere of this sort then can be allowed to remain on the outside of a system of redemption, which has for its object man as such in his fallen state."<sup>4</sup>

But this recalls us forcefully to our earlier observation. Why, envisioning such a scope for redemption and having such persistent political connections, did Nevin make so little in the way of social and political commentary after his move to Mercersburg? Why after moving within shouting distance of the Mason-Dixon line at the very start of the momentous 1840s did this born-and-bred opponent of slavery have nothing to say about it? And why, virtually within hearing distance of the cannon of Antietam and Gettysburg, did this theoretician of history, this champion of historical consciousness, this lecturer (at the time) in history at Franklin and Marshall College have so little to say about the momentous history unfolding under his nose, or about the issues that had forced the nation to so bloody a crisis? One possible explanation we can dismiss immediately. John Nevin was not a coward or temporizer, as anyone who has read the testimonies to his sense of duty, the account of his anti-slavery work in Pittsburgh, or his theological interchange with the Great Eminence at Princeton must attest. Perhaps, instead, Nevin was deferring to the sensibilities or the situation of his adopted German Reformed Church. That may be the starting point of our answer, but it requires us to examine the ethos of that church and the implication of Nevin's move out of Pittsburgh Presbyterianism in political-cultural context. With these in the background we can then review Nevin's theology for his response to the mounting political crisis of his time.

The cultural interpretation of antebellum American politics focuses on the way two interrelated factors, ethnicity and religion, working in tandem with the much scrutinized economic forces of the time, shaped the ideological complexes and voting behavior of the period. As these two were also central in Nevin's career, it is no surprise that a brief sketch of antebellum party alignments should call up so many resonances from his work. Ethnically, the Whig (later Republican) party had its core in the main-line Yankees of New England and their compatriots spread across upstate New York and the upper Midwest. These were joined by the urban, merchant elite of the Mid-Atlantic states to make the Whigs Anglophilic, oriented to the national whole instead of local particularity or ethnic divergence, insistent on internal unity, conformity, and prosperity. The Democrats above the Mason-Dixon line were a collection of those left out of this order: those on the New England periphery, whether geographically, economically (subsistence farmers), or denominationally (Baptists and Methodists); and especially the ethnic groups of the Mid-Atlantic states: the Scots-Irish, Germans, and Dutch. Before the great party realignment of the 1850s, these stood united in opposition to Yankee meddling and elite mercantilism, in favor of cultural pluralism and local autonomy.

The two parties also harbored contrary religious types. The Whigs attracted groups with a "pietist" or "evangelical" disposition; the Democrats, those of a "ritualist," "liturgical" cast. For politics, both projected the core of their theology upon the world at large. The

evangelicals, born and bred in revivalism, followed a fervent, conversionist, activist style; they sought "to purge the world of sin, to recreate the world for the greater glory of a personally knowable God."<sup>6</sup> Thus the church became a phalanx of voluntary associations, each attacking one evil, for the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth. They also bore the heritage of Puritan theocracy, seeing society as an organic whole, headed by a positive state which was allowed many active measures to enforce moral discipline. The ritualist disposition, on the other hand, focused on and in the church as an institution formally differentiated from the world, having unique and precious requirements of doctrine, tradition, and liturgical observance. In this view, the Kingdom of God would be fully realized only in eternity; on earth, its closest approximation was the Church. There one should go for peace, security, and grace. In the world, the realm of nature, sin was finally indelible, a particular evil only gradually remediable. Thus a positive state, especially one not deeply informed by the wisdom of the Church, was to be suspected as likely to make things worse in its effort to make them better and as imposing on the Church's prerogatives and autonomy.

Culturally, then, the heart of the Whig party was composed of the progeny of New England Puritanism: Congregationalists, Unitarians, and the New Schoolers of the Burned-Over District and beyond. The Democrats' core coalition joined Catholics and Southerners (these heavily marked by evangelical revivalism, of course, but limited to personal--not social--transformation). The Mid-Atlantic ethnics (and especially the Scots-Irish), among whom Nevin passed his entire life, held the balance of power in this system: they were literally in the middle geographically and toward the middle religiously. They were particularly under strain, therefore, as the party system cracked under the stress of the slavery and immigration issues from the mid-1840s on. Until then they held with the South and Northern Catholics in the Democratic party, giving it national hegemony for most of the antebellum period. But as Catholic (especially Irish Catholic) immigration soared and as the demands of the South increased after the mid-'40s, the New England outgroups (Baptists and Methodists) and the middle-state ethnics, first and foremost the Scots-Irish Presbyterians, began to fear less "Yankee meddling" than Catholic and "slave power" "encroachments," and so shifted their allegiance to join with their former antagonists in forming the new Republican party.

It is not difficult to locate Nevin in this context. The party labels "evangelical" and "liturgical" are tailor-made for his theological polemics. His birth within the Scots-Irish Presbyterianism of the lower North placed him on the crucial edge of the Democratic coalition, and his shift to the confessional wing of the Pennsylvania Germans put him deeper in its culture. Ethnically, his voluntary conversion to things German, his skepticism toward quick assimilation and his defense of local and ethnic autonomy gave momentum the same way. On the touchstone of the Mexican War, for instance, he appreciated its results, while dodging the question of its morality, as providing the immense tracts of land needed for personal liberty, small-group autonomy, and national glory--altogether a Democratic statement. And he had no doubt that the nation's glory lay in full and free admission for all immigrants, their long-range distinctiveness, and their eventual melting not into a (New) Anglo-conformity but into a truly new cosmopolitan nation. In words to chill a New England--and New School--heart, Nevin declared in 1848:

The day for "nativism," in all its forms, is fast drawing to an end....the life of Europe is to be poured upon our shores without restraint or stint, till it shall cause the ancient blood of the land to become in quantity a mere nothing in comparison.<sup>10</sup>

Here Nevin struck the noble side of the Democratic balance; but he was also stuck with its conspiracy of silence on the other great issue of the day, Southern slavery.

But other of Nevin's themes show him not entirely conforming to the Democratic profile. His organic vision of society and of close state-church coordination echoed something of the 17th century Puritanism which, devotionally, he also admired and which lay behind Whiggery more than Democracy. His abhorrence of individualism comported ill with the Jeffersonian legacy, and his hope for the realization of the Kingdom of God was not left entirely to eternity as in a pure ritualist position. Above all, Nevin disliked reckless partisanship, which in the antebellum years was recognizably more the property of the Democrats than of the Whigs. Perhaps these anomalies betray the presence in Nevin's background, as in his neighbor Buchanan's, of old Federalist strains from the turn of the century.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps they indicate a sense on Nevin's part of the insufficiency of either party to solve the problems of the day, or even to master its own paradoxes. For how could the Whigs have it both ways: growth, individual willfulness, sectarian multiplication on the one hand, and organic harmony, stable order on the other? As for the Democrats, how long could white and ethnic liberties live beside black slavery; and how could a simple, face-to-face society of local rights survive the national expansion and economic development that this party also hailed?<sup>12</sup>

Nevin's work bears recognition of such confusion of values, and his career took crucial turns synchronically with political conflicts thus engendered. Whatever his own reflections on duty and divine providence, his move to Mercersburg was launched by the Presbyterian schism of 1837. Yet that event had lively socio-cultural motives and was laden with political portents. If it was not the first shot of the Civil War, it, along with the Baptist and Methodist splits that followed soon thereafter,<sup>13</sup> presaged and to some extent provoked the crisis of the Union in 1861. Thus Nevin's attack on "Party Spirit" in 1840 applied equally to the Presbyterian battle three years before and to the notorious political campaign currently underway. Similarly, Nevin's "breakdown" in 1851 and retirement in 1853 anticipated by just a year or two the same developments in the Whig party and with them, the "collapse" of the party system that had made the Union workable for the previous twenty five years. Both Nevin's inaugural at Mercersburg and his "farewell address" at the opening of Franklin and Marshall College in 1853 included political prophecy. Nothing would be more important to the nation's future, he said, than what went on in "the mighty mass of mind between the Atlantic and the Alleghenies..."; and what went on put Pennsylvania in the Republican column in 1860, giving Lincoln the election and the South secession fever.<sup>14</sup>

Through all this, however, Nevin worked as a theologian. Augustus Neander was the spiritual obstetrician of his "new birth" into historical consciousness in Pittsburgh, and its full consequence later in Mercersburg was a "churchly" conversion. Nevin turned away from politics in going to Mercersburg--just as he had turned away from "political economy" the year

before going to Pittsburgh--as a futility, a vanity unable to "bring any positive aid to Christianity," unable even to solve the secular problem it addressed, and so testifying only to the need for a "supernatural redemption for society...."<sup>15</sup> Churchly, sacramental theology, in other words, was politics by a transcendental means, the only means adequate to the problem at hand. The works for which we remember Nevin thus deserve a re-reading in light of their socio-cultural burden and their use of a course of analysis parallel to one common in the political commentary of the time.

The Anxious Bench in this regard becomes a tract of cultural warfare. Just as Nevin used the bench as the center and symbol of the whole new measures system, so that system generated and represented a full cultural complex, one descendant from New England Puritanism but now--and this precipitated Nevin's rejoinder--threatening the confessional German circle which he had recently joined and which was just emerging from its provincial slumbers with bright promise for the ecclesiastical and national future. What Nevin said about New School spirituality applied, by his implication and often in historical fact, to the whole congeries of "ultraisms," perfectionisms, reform panaceas, and single-issue politics it bred. These were theatrical, mechanical, and often shallow; generating endless division; morbid, disorderly, and fanatical in spirit and fruit. Above all, the religion and the political sociology alike suffered from "quackery": the pretense of a power or virtue not actually possessed, thus requiring ever more extravagant exhibition to be believed. Both rose from a false individualistic and rationalistic view of human nature and of people's ability to change themselves; from a shallow, fragmentary, legalistic concept of sin and evil; from an immediatist, violent model of change. Dismissing the whole for the part, exchanging the objective power of God for the subjective state of the soul, reformer and revivalist engaged in self-glorification on the grandest scale. Also of the most aggressive sort, for they could not be satisfied until all were made over in their own image. Revival and reform in this mode, in sum, became the very epitome of Yankee delusion and interference.<sup>16</sup>

The anxious bench, Nevin argued, necessarily gave birth to sect and schism, the social manifestation of its self-centered principle. Accordingly, we can find in his writings on the sect spirit and system--which he labelled no less than the Antichrist, the force of destruction and damnation--even more direct parallels to political conditions. Nevin's characterization of "the sect mind" used the same language he applied to "the party spirit: in 1840: both

run into low cunning, disingenuous trickery and jesuitic policy. Religion [like politics] degenerates with it into a trade, in which men come to terms with God [the nation] on the subject of their own salvation [citizenship and office], and lay away their spiritual acquisitions as a sort of outward property for convenient use. The object is required to bend and bow to the subject....<sup>17</sup>

Nevin's assault on the sectarians' magical potion of "the Bible alone" + "private judgment" duplicates the critique often made of those reformers who placed their own intuitively perceived "higher law" above custom, Constitution, or common law. Both sectarians and "ultra" reformers, their respective critics complained, would tear the intricate, historically developed fabric of church or society with the knife of sheer speculative abstraction. Worst of all perhaps was the hypocrisy of the process--this

distruction put forth as "progress," private judgment or higher law as the grounds of "unity," the sect or reform cell's authoritarianism as "freedom," and their notorious lack of charity as "tollerance."<sup>18</sup>

In Nevin's History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism and especially his treatise on The Mythical Presence, we come to his fuller constructive proposals, to which we will return in a moment. But first we should note his use in the latter of a term quite appropriate for theological-ecclesiastical analysis but also a common political epithet of the time, namely "Puritan." Southerners in the late antebellum and Civil War era frequently cast themselves as "Caviliers" opposing the Yankee "Roundheads," and Yankee "intolerance," "meddling," and "fanaticism" was easily identified with their stereotypically Puritan provenance.<sup>19</sup> Nevin's plea for eucharistic orthodoxy could not help but carry political overtones when it scored "the modern Puritan view," "the proper Puritan stand-point," for "falling away from" the "old Reformed view," for "eviscerat[ing] the institution of all objective force," for "utterly repudiat[ing]" the classic conception. Substitute the Constitution or Founding Fathers for the Lord's Supper and original Reformers and you have the conservative arbument against abolitionism. Moreover, Nevin's reply to Charles Hodge's review of The Mystical Presence gave, in 1850, a theological forecast of the political realignment to come later in the decade.<sup>20</sup> Presbyterian orthodoxy, Nevin declared, had so deeply imbibed of the rationalist heresy on the sacraments that short of returning to the classic Catholic and Reformed view, it would have to come to rest there in the remainder of its tenets as well. Put in political-cultural terms, it was precisely anti-Catholicism that moved enough Presbyterians out of the Democratic into the Republican coalition--with its ultras, reformers, new schoolers and all--in 1860 to change the shape of the nation.

The crisis of his times, then, Nevin saw as a set of mounting challenges to unity and authority in church, society, and state, challenges which the active forces in the North proposed to meet with increased self-will, more subjectiveism, and reform schemes having little connection with past or present. Given the live issues of the era--slavery, immigration, and incipient urbanization--and the subsequent historical record, Nevin's perception of current needs and faulting of proffered solutions were accurate enough. The "discouragement" he confessed regarding the sect problem in November 1849 matched the politicians' forebodings at the same time before the last-ditch Compromise of 1850. But that measure at least lasted four years; Nevin broke down before that. Why? What was his solution to the crisis of the times and why did it prove inadequate even to himself?

The solution had to lie at the point of the problem, and Nevin on several occasions declared the "Church question" to be the paramount problem of the age, the one under which the political, social, and philosophical problems were subsumed. This was because all "merely human" and "humanitarian" efforts, all naturally conceived and secularly wrought schemes of every sort were inadequate to the human problem. Lie required a supernatural redemption, which had begun only in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Here was the real, objective fact of a new life, of a divine and supernatural force present in history, of power to a new life available to humanity. But available only via, or rather in, the Church, the living body, the continuing real presence of new life-power in the world. And the means of transmitting and participating in this power were preeminently the sacraments. Thus Nevin declared at the Heidelberg Catechism tercentenary

celebration in the midst of the carnage of 1862-63:

What we all need...is not just good doctrine for the understanding, or good direction for the will, or good motives for the heart, but the power rather of a new life, which, proceeding from God and being inserted into our fallen nature, may redeem us from the vanity of this present evil world, and make us to be in such sort "partakers of the divine nature"....[which entails] the washing of regeneration...[in baptism, and] the communion of the body and blood of Christ...[by which] alone it is at last that this new existence is maintained in our souls. What the sacrament before us [the Lord's Supper] thus signifies and seals<sup>21</sup> for our faith is the inmost meaning of Christianity.

So redeemed, the Church must be "the fountain of spiritual life to the dead mass with which she is surrounded...." But a Church so fragmented by sectarianism and so heretical in the sacraments as American Protestantism could be at best a most inefficient channel of new life, if not a shameful travesty upon it. Hence Nevin's constant critique and attempts at reconstruction on the points of sect and sacrament. The solution for the problem of the times came down to . . . a revival!: "a revival of true and hearty faith in the ancient article of the holy catholic Church."<sup>22</sup>

This may seem leagues away from the issues of slavery and tariff, expansion and Irish immigration that dominated the political agenda of the times; but Nevin was saying to American Christians: 'First things first. If Christ is the only source and power of regeneration, for ourselves and our society, then we had better be sure we really and truly have Him--or better, that He has us. Then discussion of and application of His power in the world around us can begin.' Their deaf ear doubtless helped push Nevin to his breakdown and retirement. But while he still wrote, hard by the Mason-Dixon line, he contributed by analogy a loving and dolorous prophecy about the future of the nation as well--a lamentation over individual self-will, perpetual fragmentation, irresponsible partisanship; and a call for mystical union in the face of and under the power of that mystical presence. Nevin's was a border-state theology, as earnest and as ineffectual as the border-state compromises proposed in the secession winter of 1860-61. The last note of those proposals echoed Nevin's language remarkably, coming as it did from a similar Romantic, organicist view of history. With Nevin's new neighbor, James Buchanan, sitting on the platform, Lincoln closed his first inaugural with the hope that "the mystic chords of memory, stretching...to every living heart and hearth stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union...."

Certainly the times were against border and mediating states of all kinds. Geographically, politically, theologically, what William Butler Yeats said in 1919 applied to the U. S. in 1861.

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is doomed;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

But what in Nevin's system itself made it lack conviction in this crisis? Two things, I believe. First, for one so interested in historical change and in the nature and action of the Church, Nevin said very little about how the Church was to work in the world, about the means and ends of the change it was to effect there. Nowhere do we find in his writings a specific, concretely illustrated picture of the redeemed individual or community. Doubtless Nevin wished to avoid the legalist, behavioral proscriptions which revivalists adduced at this point; but an alternative sketch might be expected nonetheless. So also with the broader strategy of Christian action in the world. Granted the redeemed Church and the sinful but to-be-redeemed world, what are the middle terms of connection and transferal? Nevin said only that redemption worked slowly and gradually, like leaven, like the gentle rain instead of the tempest, by the still small voice instead of wind or fire.<sup>23</sup> That helps some but not much. Partly the problem here was that Nevin's preoccupation with getting the "redeemed Church" straight left little time for concerns of application. Besides, Nevin was here especially reflecting the environs of his life: stable, old-fashioned Presbyterianism, quiet Princeton, the German Reformed circle of southeastern Pennsylvania. Anyone raised in an ethnic province knows that life and change can proceed much as Nevin describes--naturally, invisibly, by habit and example, with no need for theoretical model-building or centralized administration. New School environments, by contrast, tended to be busy, expansive, and tumultuous: the Erie Canal bisected what became in the wake of the transportation revolution it brought the Burned-Over District of revival fire.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, Nevin's system at this point suffered from a dualism that he did not so much profess as evince. Much as he rejected the sacred-profane dichotomy, lamented the religious-secular split of his (revivalistic) Union College education, Nevin tended to operate by, and sometimes advocated, a transcendence of the spiritual over the material, inward over outward, grace over nature, and by extension, Church over world. German Idealism had much to do with this. Time and again, in articles and lectures, Nevin played the Kantian triads or ascending scales: body-mind-will, natural-mental-moral, or further elaborated, physical-chemical-biological-mental-moral-religious.<sup>25</sup> The farther up the scale the better, also for a person's being and living. Sometimes this promoted escapism, as in the address on "Party Spirit" where Nevin told his student audience, in light of the hubbub of the times: "Soar in spirit above the region of sense and particular opinion....[to] the empyrean sphere of absolute and eternal truth." Cultivate "that divine philosophy whose organ is pure reason...[and which contemplates] the original and everlasting ideas of Religion itself."<sup>26</sup> A generation later, after the Civil War, Nevin "solemnly" and "in the way of warning" reminded Franklin and Marshall College students: "Nature is not Grace. That which is born of the flesh is at last...flesh only, and not Spirit. It can never, in its own order, save the world. Ye, surely, have not so learned Christ."

What then were the students to do? Nevin came close on this occasion to realizing the German Idealist penchant for dissolving Christianity into "spiritual culture." If the age be preoccupied with "outside references and ends," let us "enlarge the mind in its own sphere....it is all-important that the working-spirit of the country should be...leavened by a corresponding thinking spirit." But at the same time he proposed a type of dualism:

We must be children of our country and also children of

our age....Only let us try to be so, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, in such sort that we shall be likewise all children of the light and true sons of God, in being at the same time true sons of the church.

The last line implies still another, and the most common solution in Nevin: tenancy in the church as a realm of refuge from, transcendence over, or true fulfillment of the world. Set in H. Richard Niebuhr's famous typology, Nevin offers Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ and culture in paradox, most often Christ above culture, without substantiating the option he surely desired, Christ transforming culture.

Both because of and in spite of these problems, Nevin's example offers some guidance for the negotiation of the religion-politics interchange in our own day. For instance, we have in his anatomy of three false types of ecumenism a critique of their modern counterparts in the faith-in-practice field. The combination of minimal confession and administrative superstructure (Nevin's Evangelical Alliance) characterizes too many denominations and both National clearinghouses--the Council of Churches and the Association of Evangelicals. The devolution of faith into works, a secular humanitarianism, one can find virtually wherever one likes. The dream of building one true model in which all are invited--commanded--to find unity (Nevin's Campbellite option) is evident, perhaps not exclusively, in the erstwhile Moral Majority (whose change of name may indicate a shuttling toward option #2, in the name, of course, of combatting secularism).<sup>28</sup> Nevin's example should also caution us against being one-sided, even in our condemnation of one-sidedness. For while he accurately faulted the schemes of the revivalistic "ultras" in the North, he gave no critique to the demands and self-righteousness of the South. Neither morally nor historically can abolitionists be blamed for the Civil War. The South, and Northern centrist bumbling and dodging were certainly more at fault, and Nevin neither reproved the first nor offered tangible guidance, a plausible alternative, for the second.

Members of Reformed churches should also be concerned, from the antebellum example, with maintaining the full body of their tradition. As Brian Gerrish has noted, Nevin and Hodge in their argument each consigned the other one part of Calvin's legacy--the decrees to Princeton, the sacraments to Mercersburg.<sup>29</sup> Nor was that all. Together they consigned the cultural-transformative dimension of Calvinism to the New School descendants of New England. We cannot say that because Calvinism fragmented, so did the Union; but given the abuses or weaknesses to which Hodge's predestinarianism, Nevin's churchliness, and the New School's activism were each prone, we should worry about what can happen to Calvinism as a theology and in social action when its various tenets are removed from the chemistry of the whole. It is no accident that the best political and theological interpretation of the Civil War, Lincoln's Second Inaugural, was a homily on Psalm 19, a hymn to God's ordinances in Creation and Law; and that the speech achieved its power by emphasizing collective depravity, corporate original sin, and the mysterious decrees of God--all themes of Calvinism that its antebellum adherents missed in one way or another.

But what American Christians today can most learn from Nevin--and here altogether positively--is that God's elect and redeemed people is the Church, not the nation, not even the American Union. Some of Nevin's diffidence in wartime might well have stemmed from his perception that while the issues of the war were immense, they were not (so far as they involved

the question of Union) eschatological, most less apocalyptic. With direct reference to Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," which claimed exactly that, Nevin gibed:

the march of events (though it may be but John Brown's soul marching on--God knows whiter) is trumpeted to the four winds of heaven as the stately goings of Jehovah Jesus Himself, riding forth prosperously to subdue the nations under His feet....[But] the millennium it promises is not the reign of the saints foretold by the prophets and apostles; and it is only too plain, alas! that the agencies and tendencies which are held to be working towards it, carry in them no sure guaranty whatsoever of millennial triumph in any form. All the signs of the times...betoken universal and fundamental changes. But we have no assurance in these signs that the change will move on victoriously in the line of universal righteousness and truth....Along with titanic strength<sup>30</sup> we see at work on all sides titanic corruption and sin.

To recall the Yeats poem we cited before, the rough beast that came slouching out of the American Civil War was a coarse and often vicious industrialism, born in Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. While its values offended both the hopes of the millennialists and the standards of Nevin, he at least had the critical distance to know that these cities were neither Bethlehem nor the New Jerusalem. His lack of an ultimate earthly loyalty enable him to see better things as they were and would be. Straight loyalties give right insight. From Nevin and his rivals may we learn that as the basis of right action.

## NOTES

1. Lee Benson, The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case (Princeton, 1961), was the pioneer work of this interpretation. Paul Kleppner, The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900 (New York, 1970), works out the two mentalities within the analysis descriptively and statistically. Robert Kelley, The Cultural Pattern in American Politics: The First Century (New York, 1979), is a fine synthesis.
2. Philip Shriver Klein, President James Buchanan: A Biography (State College PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1962), pp. 27, 29.
3. John W. Nevin, "The Christian Ministry," in Theodore Appel, The Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin (Philadelphia, 1889), pp. 108-9.
4. John W. Nevin, "Catholicity," in Appel, Life and Work, pp. 373-9.
5. Kelley, Cultural Pattern, pp. 160-75.
6. Kleppner, Cross of Culture, contributes these labels and a succinct anatomy of the two parties; quotation, p. 74.
7. Ibid., pp. 73-4; Kelley, Cultural Pattern, pp. 268-72.
8. Kelley, Cultural Pattern, pp. 164-75, 274-81.
9. John W. Nevin, "The Year 1848," Mercersburg Review I/1(January 1849): 23.
- 10: Ibid., p. 32.
11. Klein, James Buchanan, 16-9.
12. Kelley, Cultural Pattern, pp. 160-63.
13. C.C., Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation (Mercer GA, 1985), p. 13.
14. Nevin, "The Christian Ministry," p. 114 (source of quotation); and "Opening Address," in Appel, Life and Work, p. 443-54.
15. John W. Nevin, My Own Life: The Early Years (Lancaster, 1964; originally published 1870), p. 31.
16. John W. Nevin, The Anxious Bench: A Tract for the Times, in Charles Yriogoyen, Jr. and George H. Bricker, eds., Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin (Pittsburgh 1978), originally published 1844 (second edition), pp. 9-126. On the political and social spin-offs of revivalism, see Whitney R. Gross, The Burned Over District (Ithaca, 1950), and Ronald G. Walters, American Reformers, 1815-1860 (New York, 1980).

17. Quotation from "The Sect System," in Yrigoyen and Bricker, Catholic and Reformed, p. 169 (originally published in Mercersburg Review I/5-6 (September-November 1849)).
18. Ibid., pp. 135-53.
19. William R. Taylor, Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character (New York, 1961); and Bertram Wyatt Brown, Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners (Baton Rouge, 1985).
20. Quotations from Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, eds., The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist (Philadelphia and Boston, 1966) which collection also contains Nevin's reply to Hodge, "Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper," pp. 267-401, originally published in Mercersburg Review II/5 (September 1850).
21. John W. Nevin, "Undying Life in Christ," in Appel, Life and Works, p. 626.
22. Nevin, Anxious Bench, p. 115; and Antichrist, or the Spirit of Sect and Schism, excerpted in James H. Nichols, ed., The Mercersburg Theology (New York, 1966), p. 114 (originally published 1848).
23. Nevin, "Catholicity," pp. 383-4.
24. Paul E. Johnson, A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, 1815-1837 (New York, 1978).
25. See students' notes of his lectures on History, Aesthetics, and Ethics in the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society archives, Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster PA. Exemplary articles on this point are "Party Spirit," "Catholicity," "Undying Life in Christ," and "Faith, Reverence, and Freedom."
26. Nevin, "Party Spirit," in Appel, Life and Work, p. 125.
27. John W. Nevin, "Commencement Address," in Appel, Life and Work, pp. 648-9, 652.
28. Nevin, Antichrist, pp. 13-4.
29. B.A. Gerrish, Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago, 1978), p. 70.
30. Nevin, "Commencement Address," p. 647.

## NEVIN AND THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

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In mid-nineteenth century American Protestantism there raged a great debate concerning baptism between advocates of infant and proponents of believers' baptism. The champions of believers' baptism, the Baptists and that new breed of baptistic persuasion, the Campbellites, were on the march. The defenders of infant baptism were in retreat. In his Mystical Presence (1846) Nevin deplored the fact that not only had the Baptists become the most numerous denomination in the country but the baptistic principle had come to prevail, namely that the ordinance had no sacramental value.

In the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review (January 1857) Charles Hodge laments the "Neglect of Infant Baptism" in Presbyterian churches. He publishes statistics that show a steady decline in the ratio of infants baptized to the total number of members over the previous fifty years not only in the Presbyterian Church but also in the Dutch Reformed and Congregational Churches. Hodge points out that in 1811 among Presbyterians there were about 200 children baptized for every thousand communicants; in 1856 there were only 50. He reports for the Dutch Reformed Church that in 1856 68 children were baptized per thousand members, but the statistics for 1856 reveal a still greater neglect on the part of New England Congregationalists --only 16 children baptized per 1000 members. Hodge comments: "...in the Congregational churches in New England, infant baptism is, beyond doubt, dying out."<sup>2</sup>

Hodge sets forth what he considers to be the reasons for such extensive neglect of infant baptism. He names first the growth of anti-pedobaptist bodies, such as the movement of Alexander Campbell, and the influence of Congregational, Arminian and semi-Pelagian elements in Presbyterianism. But the disease is blamed not only on germs from without, but also upon germs from within, namely, the neglect of pastors in giving full instruction concerning baptism, the improper administration of the ordinance, dispensing it to children of parents with whom the minister is scarcely acquainted, the failure of the Church to recognize baptized children as members after baptism, and the decline in family worship.<sup>3</sup> Hodge thus points to certain practical reasons for the neglect of infant baptism.

To Nevin the causes of the depreciation of infant baptism lie deeper. They are not just practical but theoretical. They have to do with the conception of the Church and the sacrament, and between these two there is the closest connection. In The Mystical Presence he argued already that: "In proportion as the sect character prevails, it will be found that baptism and the Lord's Supper are looked upon as mere outward signs, in the case of which all proper efficacy is supposed to be previously at hand in the inward state of the subject by whom they are received. It is this feeling which leads so generally to the rejection of infant baptism, on the part of those who affect to improve our Christianity in the way of new schisms."<sup>4</sup> But he goes on to assert that the "baptistic principle" which negates the objective sacramental value of baptism rules not alone among Baptists but also among good Reformed Protestants. What he calls the modern Puritan view with its sectarian spirit and subjective, anti-sacramental tendency is responsible for the for the disposition to reject infant baptism. "If the sacraments

are regarded as in themselves outward rites only, that can have no value or force except as the grace they represent is made to be present by the subjective exercises of the worshiper...it is hard to see on what grounds infants, who are still without knowledge or faith, should be admitted to any privilege of the sort. If there be no objective reality in the life of the Church, as something deeper and more comprehensive than the life of the individual believer separately taken, infant baptism becomes necessarily an unmeaning contradiction."<sup>5</sup>

To some extent Nevin and Hodge agree as to the causes of the depreciation of infant baptism, what Hodge calls "the influence of Congregational, Arminian, and semi-Pelagian elements" and what Nevin calls the Modern Puritan or the sectarian spirit. Both are referring to revivalism and the theology of revivalism which put the emphasis upon the human decision in the process of salvation and for entrance into the Church and upon the work of the Spirit directly in the hearts of believers without need of external sacraments. The roots of this anti-sacramental piety of revivalism go back to the Great Awakening when already Calvinistic sacramental doctrine was waning among New England Congregational clergy and laity. Concomitant with its demise was the departure of many Congregationalists from the fold to become Baptists.<sup>6</sup> But, as Brooks Holifield points out, Nevin with the label "Modern Puritan" must have been aware that the nineteenth century "Puritans" were not necessarily to be identified with their seventeenth century counterparts. Indeed, Holifield demonstrates that, though seventeenth century Puritans were by no means of the same mind, there was a strong Calvinistic sacramental doctrine and piety among them.

Of course, Hodge and Nevin differ as to what in revivalism and its theology is primarily responsible for the neglect of infant baptism; for Hodge it is the false theory of salvation, Arminian and semi-Pelagian, with the emphasis upon the human will rather than upon divine grace, whereas for Nevin, though this consideration plays a role, he excoriates far more a false doctrine of the Church and of the sacrament.

Although Nevin touched on baptism already in the Mystical Presence of 1846, his first substantial treatment occurred in a long review article of Horace Bushnell's famous work, "Discourses on Christian Nurture" which entitled him to be known as the forerunner of modern religious education. It is of interest to us in the United Church of Christ that Nevin's first wrestlings on this subject were with him who is also called the "Father of liberal Congregationalism." His review<sup>8</sup> extended over four issues of "The Weekly Messenger" in the summer of 1847.

Nevin showed a deep appreciation for this work of Bushnell. It was especially welcome to him as emanating from the home of Puritanism which he usually castigates as embodying the subjectivistic, individualistic, anti-churchly and anti-sacramental tendencies of much of American Protestantism. Nevin comments: "The tract is at bottom contrary to the whole Puritan theory of religion; and yet, strange to say, the author is himself a Puritan and fails at last to make any real and full escape from the power of his own system." But before launching into a critique of Bushnell's ideas, he sets them forth fully and fairly and points out the value in them. He agrees with Bushnell's criticism of the then dominant scheme of Christian nurture, revivalism which assumed that the child grew up a sinner until experiencing a sudden, dramatic conversion. In contrast, Bushnell set forth in his tract the now familiar proposition: "That the child is to grow up as a

Christian." Already in a well known treatise<sup>10</sup> Nevin had pitted the "system of the catechism" against the "system of the anxious bench," a system which stresses the gradual spiritual growth of the child under the working of divine grace and proper religious training over against a system which emphasizes spasmodic conversions.

Nevin agreed also with Bushnell in his attack upon the rampant individualism in the religious life of 19th century America with the concomitant failure to recognize the law of organic connection in life. He quotes with favor Bushnell's statement: "A pure separate, individual man, living wholly within, and from himself is a mere fiction."<sup>11</sup> Nevin was fully persuaded that "The whole constitution of the world contradicts the atom theory of religion," that humanity is not a sum of discrete particulars but an organic whole. Individuals are shaped and bound by the social context in which they find themselves--family, race, nation. The Pelagian individualistic notion goes counter both to experience and Scripture, for also in Scripture there is expressed the view that there is an organic connection between Adam and the whole human race, and Nevin is pleased that Bushnell acknowledged "an important truth underlying the old doctrine of federal headship and original or imputed sin."<sup>12</sup>

Nevin welcomes Bushnell's insight that infant baptism is consonant only with an organic understanding of religion which underlies the concept of Christian education he is expressing. While Bushnell notes the neglect of infant baptism on the part of parents, he urges the rite upon them not because of what it operates, namely any actual regeneration of infants, but because of what it signifies, namely that "the faith and character of the parent will be reproduced in the child," and that "God promises...to dispense that spiritual grace which is necessary to the fulfillment of its import."<sup>13</sup>

But for all the praise that Nevin lavishes upon Bushnell's treatise as an excellent antidote to the "rampant, fanatical individualism" of Protestant Christianity in mid-nineteenth century America, he finds fault with it. His major criticism is that Bushnell seems to have based his theory of Christian nurture on the constitution of human nature rather than "upon the constitution of grace, as a strictly supernatural system." "In other words," Nevin says, "the argument is rationalistic." In spite of Bushnell's seeming acceptance of the doctrine of original sin, Nevin does not think that the Hartford minister takes that doctrine with sufficient seriousness, for he asks: "If our nature is radically corrupt, how can it be expected to unfold itself by simple religious culture into a truly Christian form? The case would seem to require at least a supernatural change to begin with...."<sup>14</sup> Nevin goes on to criticize Bushnell's doctrine of original sin as defective, for it understands that doctrine not in the traditional sense as signifying a radical debilitation of human nature, but rather in a Hegelian sense as "a necessary accident" which, rather than precluding our Christian development, is "the occasion or medium by which it takes place." Correspondingly, Bushnell's doctrine of regeneration appears to Nevin as resting primarily upon the "capabilities of human nature" assisted, to be sure, by God's Spirit, rather than a new supernatural act, the implantation of a new divine seed to do battle with the old germ which has produced the disease.

The deficiency of Bushnell's view becomes clear, according to Nevin, in his conception of Christian baptism. He compliments Bushnell's recognition

that the practice of infant baptism presupposes an organic theory of Christianity which flies in the face of the individualistic religion advocated and carried on not only by the Baptists but even by denominations who traditionally favor infant baptism, such as Bushnell's own Congregationalists. But Bushnell's theory of infant baptism which understands baptism as a sign and seal of faith not actual but "presumed" because it is presumed that the child will grow up in the faith and character of the Christian parent, is faulty. What is missing here from Bushnell's account is any notion of baptism as truly a divine sacrament conveying supernatural grace.

In Nevin's view Christian nurture rests not just upon the organic connection between Christian parent and child but upon the organic connection between Christ and His Church, "which is the continuation of Christ's life in the world and denominated for this very reason HIS BODY..." The Church is thus of a supernatural constitution, yet at the same time it exists "in harmony with the laws of this life." In the Church as the bearer of Christ's life humanity finds its fulfillment. We become incorporated into this new humanity through baptism, which is not simply a rite sealing faith, but a holy sacrament with objective, supernatural force. Not simply by mere natural birth, not by the faith and character of the parents only, but by grace mediated through the sacrament of baptism do infants become "children of God: and cease to be "children of wrath."<sup>15</sup>

In his Argument for Discourses on Christian Nurture written in reply to criticisms of his treatise, Bushnell responds at length to Nevin's critique. His response is as cordial and agreeable toward Nevin's review as Nevin's review was toward his Discourses. He rejoices that Nevin appreciates the organic as opposed to the atomic theory of religion. But Bushnell rejects the charge of Nevin that his view is at base naturalistic and rationalistic. He admits that he adopted a naturalistic rather than a supernaturalistic language, not intending to deny the supernatural element, but in order to prevent confusion with the kind of "fantastic" supernaturalism which both he and Nevin oppose that assumes the supernatural influence as entering the world only in an abrupt, external manner without an inner, organic union. When he affirmed that the child's faith and character are rooted in the character and treatment of the parent, he had in mind that this character and treatment are themselves the result of divine grace.<sup>16</sup>

Bushnell does not really deal with Nevin's criticism of his doctrine of baptism except to suggest that Nevin's views on "the sacramental grace" of baptism and "the church" are doubtful. How far removed he is from Nevin on this subject is clear from the following statement: "But if we take this view, so ably set forth in the extract here given [in which Nevin puts forward his teaching of 'the supernatural in human natural form'] it follows, of course, that the Christian family and its organic laws are penetrated by the supernatural element; and as the family is closer about the child, and touches him in points more numerous, and ways more sovereign over character, 'the Church that is in the house' has a great deal more to do with him, in the first years of his life, than the Church universal or any public sacrament."<sup>17</sup>

It is no wonder that Bushnell's defense did not wholly satisfy Nevin who reviewed it in the Weekly Messenger. Nevin seems to retreat from his charge of a naturalistic rationalism, but he still accuses Bushnell of a

rationalism in the refined sense characteristic, he thinks, of New England theology in general, what he chooses now to call "rationalistic supernaturalism"<sup>18</sup> which he does not really define but by which he seems to mean the anti-churchly and anti-sacramental tendencies of Puritanism.

Charles Hodge, the eminent Old School Presbyterian Divine of Princeton, made this debate a three cornered affair with his review of Bushnell's two tracts in the October 1847 issue of BRPR. He declares his agreement with Bushnell on two major points: 1) "the intimate religious connection between parents and children" and 2) "the primary importance of Christian nurture as the means of building up the Church."<sup>19</sup> Like Nevin, Hodge welcomes Bushnell's critique of revivalistic religion with its emphasis on abrupt conversion as the means of the edification of the Church. However, also like Nevin, he is critical of a perceived naturalistic explanation of the connection between parent and child. For Hodge, the basis for the religious link between parents and children is the covenant promise. "It is," he says, "a scriptural truth that the children of God, as being within his covenant with their parents, he promises to them His Spirit, he has established a connection between faithful parental training and the salvation of children...."<sup>20</sup> Just as circumcision in the Old Testament, so baptism in the New Testament testifies that children of Christian parents belong to the covenant and they are signs and seals of the same, and here Hodge uses a favorite Reformed argument for infant baptism that goes all the way back to Zwingli. For both Hodge and Bushnell baptism is not the means of incorporation into the Church. It is not a channel of grace. For Bushnell it is simply the sign of the organic connection between the parent's faith and character and the child's; for Hodge it is the sign of the divine promise which already before baptism includes the children of Christian parents in the covenant. Such a conception Nevin lambasts in his review of Bushnell even before Hodge writes his own: "What do good men mean, when they tell us that the children of professing parents are Christians likewise, members of the Church and heirs of all its grace, by their mere natural birth?...Our birth relation to pious parents may give us a right to be taken into the Church, but it can never of itself make us to be in the Church as our born privilege, authorizing our parents to bring us up as Christians from the womb..."<sup>21</sup> For Nevin the basis for our belonging to the Church and for this authorization is rather the sacrament of holy baptism.

To Hodge such a view as Nevin's smacked of ritualism and magic. Without naming him, Hodge, at the end of his review of Bushnell's treatise, characterizes Nevin's understanding of the sacraments, Church and redemption as un-Protestant and false, namely, that the sacraments have an efficacy apart from the faith of the believer, that the external Church rather than the community of believers is the body of Christ and is the one medium of approach to Christ, that redemption involves the partaking of the human nature of Christ rather than the indwelling of the life of God in the soul by the Holy Spirit. "The whole doctrine," he writes, "is nothing but a form of the physical theory of religion."<sup>22</sup> In other words, Hodge suggests that the Mercersburg theology is guilty of a medieval Catholic theory of the Church with a crude ex opere operato understanding of the sacraments.

To Nevin, on the other hand, the standpoint of his great teacher, Hodge, was unsacramental, spiritualistic and unchurchly just like so much of the New Light Protestantism that Hodge otherwise denounced. In the very next spring and summer, 1848 Nevin and Hodge would engage in a famous

quarrel over these same matters when the focus of their discussion would be the Lord's Supper rather than baptism.

Just after the series of review articles on Bushnell's Discourses on Christian Nurture an inquiry concerning "baptismal grace" directed to Nevin was penned for the August 11, 1847 Messenger. Nevin's response provides us with some understanding as to how he would reply to Hodge's accusation of sacramental magic in his doctrine. The inquirer asks whether Nevin views "baptismal grace" as equivalent with "baptismal regeneration." "Does he believe that baptism, when rightly administered, is invariably and immediately accompanied with regeneration?" Although Nevin notes the ambiguity of the phrase "baptismal regeneration," he makes it clear that he rejects the idea of a "regeneration" as that term is ordinarily understood, as necessarily flowing from baptism, but he also affirms his full acceptance of the notion of an objective grace in the sacrament. And he compares the baptismal act with the outward call of the disciples "which did not of itself convert them, as we see clearly from the case of Judas; though it certainly carried with it objectively a full real title to all that is comprehended in the Christian salvation,"<sup>23</sup> as this came to be actualized subsequently in all of them except Judas.

That Nevin does not have in mind a mechanical ex opere operato conception of the sacrament as effective apart from the subjective disposition of the recipient is clear from his response to a second series of questions from the same inquirer. Question: "Is the grace which is communicated by baptism, saving grace or not?" Answer: "If this means grace that actually saves the subject, No; if the sense be that it is able through faith to save him, Yes." Nevin reaffirms that the sacrament has an objective force whose efficacy rests not upon the minister or the parents of the child baptized but upon Christ himself and lest one<sup>24</sup> think that this is a Romish doctrine only, he throws in, "as Calvin says." On the other hand, for that objective grace to be truly effective, saving grace, it must be received in faith. Already in the Anxious Bench he criticized a mechanical, sacramental understanding and piety that take the place of a true Christocentric doctrine and devotion. In this regard he likens the use of the anxious bench<sup>25</sup> to the Puseyite and Papist substitution of the Baptismal Font for Christ.

Nevin's next expression of his views on baptism occurs in the March 1, 1848 issue of the Weekly Messenger in an article entitled, "A Romanizing Tendency." In this article he takes delight in twitting his critic, Joseph F. Berg, Minister of Race Street Church in Philadelphia and publisher of the Protestant Banner, for having been accused by the Baptist paper, The New York Recorder, of being a supporter of "the main pillar of the Papacy" with his strong advocacy of infant baptism. How ironic that Berg who sees "a Romanizing tendency" in all that stands between his position and that of Rome is here himself accused of the same error.

But Nevin thinks that Berg should acknowledge the truth of the Baptist accusation. Berg does ally himself with the Roman Church to uphold one of the ancient bulwarks of the faith, just as much else is derived from this Church, such as the Creed, Christian worship, sacraments, etc. On this subject, Dr. Berg should admit that "in defending infant baptism, he follows to a certain extent the authority of tradition, in its proper legitimate form," for the Baptist paper is right that Dr. Berg did not draw his

doctrine of infant baptism from the letter of Scripture, since "There is no direct, positive appointment of infant baptism in the whole Bible, and no clear and explicit example of its use."

He goes on to argue what will be a major theme in his writings on the subject, that infant baptism makes no sense except as it is closely connected with the idea of the Church, as the body of Christ and the "real bearer of a supernatural life." Infant baptism presupposes an objective force in the sacrament itself and this in turn "implies the presence of a divine and life-bearing constitution in the Church itself," to be sure, a cardinal doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church but also, Nevin thinks, of the Catholic Church in general including Reformation Protestantism which like the Roman Church adheres to the creedal article "holy, catholic church."

In contrast with Dr. Berg and other defenders of pedobaptism Nevin chooses not to argue with the Baptists on their own ground, namely the letter of Scripture, the interpretation of Greek verbs and prepositions. He determines rather to argue from the life of Christianity itself, "grace and truth made human first in Christ himself, and then perpetually in the Church." Without naming him, Nevin then draws on an argument of Irenaeus against the Gnostics that Christ showed by his having gone through all the stages of human life that he sanctified all ages and "recapitulated" or "summed up" all of humanity.<sup>26</sup> Nevin argues that, since Christ went through the stages of human development from the womb to the grave, it is necessary and proper that the process of salvation in the Church should include infancy and childhood as well as adulthood. To exclude a large portion of our universal humanity from baptism and participation in the process of Christianity "because incapable of any real comprehension in the kingdom of God, or the new life of Christ in the Church, is in truth to turn the fact of Christ himself into a Gnostic phantom, and to make his whole salvation unearthly and unreal." He says it's no wonder that the Church from the beginning took a different view and brought "her children into covenant with God by holy baptism."<sup>27</sup>

Further reflections on this "chief" argument for infant baptism and on the origins of infant baptism in the Church occur in his first extensive engagement with the Baptist position, a lengthy review of an Essay on Christian Baptism by the English Baptist, W. Noel, printed in the Mercersburg Review, May 1850. The controversy with the Baptists, he says, hangs on two questions, the first, concerning the mode of baptism, the second, concerning its proper recipients.

Regarding the first issue he concedes that the Baptists have a strong case. "Baptize" did have "immerse" as its original meaning and immersion seems to have been the regular practice of the early Church according to the New Testament. Though he criticizes the literalness of the Baptist understanding and thinks that the later Western freedom concerning the mode of baptism harmonizes fully with "the true idea of Christianity," he insists that the present practice of only a few drops on the head of the infant carries that freedom too far. Such a practice suggests an unsacramental feeling not far removed from Quaker spiritualism.

Before taking up the second far more important issue Nevin considers two methodological questions: 1) concerning Biblical hermeneutics and 2) concerning the nature of a sacrament. He criticizes Noel for pretending to

come to Scripture as an empty vase with no theological presuppositions or tradition. It is blindness on his part not to recognize his own prejudices and impudence to give to his private judgment a universal value. For Nevin the proper interpretation begins not with one's own particularistic viewpoint but with an understanding of and feeling for "the general fact of Christianity as a living comprehension in its true Catholic mystery as it has stood from the beginning."<sup>28</sup>

Fundamental to "the general fact of Christianity" and "its true Catholic mystery" is the use of the sacraments and the question of their use rests "on the true idea of their nature." A sacrament in the old church sense is no mere outward rite or ordinance as Baptists like Noel think; it is both "a viable terrene sign and an invisible celestial grace; not related simply as corresponding facts, brought together by human thought; but the one actually bound to the other in the way of most real mystical or sacramental union, causing the last to be objectively at hand in one and the same transaction with the first." To Nevin a sacrament conveying no objective grace is a contradiction in terms. Baptism is no mere sign of a subjective state of the believer; it is a divine act. "It is the washing of regeneration; it saves us; it is for the remission of sins." But then he qualifies these strong statements that might suggest a mechanical ex opere operato interpretation by adding: "The mere ceremony of course is not this per se; but it goes actually to complete the work of our salvation, as the mystical exhibition in real form of that divine grace, without which all our subjective exercises...amount to nothing."<sup>29</sup>

With this view of the sacrament the idea of the Church is closely linked. The Church is not simply a union of all who embrace the Gospel, but it is the mystical body of Christ in which "the power of redemption is truly and really present." Indissolubly connected with the Church, therefore, is Christ as the new creation embracing mankind in an organic whole.

Thus, Nevin reaches what he now calls "the grand argument for infant baptism." Just as in the article concerning Berg's Romanizing, he says: "It lies not in the letter of Scripture, but in the life of Christianity itself, the true idea of the Church, the mystery of Christ as the Second Adam, in whom redemption and salvation are brought to pass for the race." As Christ is the Mediator representing in himself all mankind, having himself sanctified, as Irenaeus says, all the stages of human life, so his salvation is available to all human beings, including infants.<sup>30</sup> Such a view of Christ and his work shaped the life of the early Church and "found its natural," Nevin adds, "we might say almost necessary expression, in Infant Baptism." Nevin goes so far as to argue that "If it could be clearly made out that the household baptisms of the New Testament included no infants; nay, if it were certain that the Church had no apostolical rule whatever in the case, but had gradually settled here into her own rule; we should hold this still to be of truly divine authority, and the baptism of infants to necessary Christian obligation, as the only proper sense and meaning of the New Testament institution, interpreted thus to its full depth by the Christian life itself."<sup>31</sup>

In the section on "The Apostolical Origin of Infant Baptism" in his History of the Christian Church published in the Mercersburg Review in 1852, Schaff had likewise called this argument suggest by Irenaeus the strongest one in favor of infant baptism, but in contrast to Nevin Schaff points to specific Biblical passages to support the view of a redemption of all

persons and ages in Christ, for example the Great Commission in Matthew 28 in which Christ instructs his followers to make disciples of all nations, by baptizing in the name of the triune God, and by teaching them. Schaff asks "...do none but adults belong to a nation, and not youth and children and infants?"<sup>32</sup>

The arguments here of both Schaff and Nevin are probably based on the famous German church historian, Neander, who though skeptical about the foundation of infant baptism in the New Testament, thought infant baptism grew out of "the deepest conception of the very nature of Christianity," and Neander likewise refers to the thought of Irenaeus.<sup>33</sup>

Nevin buttresses this principal argument by referring also to the traditionally most important argument of the Reformed tradition, the analogy of the Jewish covenant community which included both adults and children. But it is remarkable how small a role that argument with its analogy of baptism to circumcision played in his thinking. More important than the analogy of the Jewish covenant is that of the whole human society embracing adults and children which finds its fulfillment in Christianity.

Without laying great stress upon it, Nevin adds the argument, also traditionally a favorite one, in support of infant baptism, the doctrine of original sin. Corresponding to this law which applies to infants as well as adults is the universal law of life in Christ.

On the basis of this theological rationale perceived by the Church in the beginning, she incorporated "infants into her communion by the initiatory seal of holy baptism." Thus, Nevin moves from general considerations of hermeneutics, doctrine of sacraments, ecclesiology, Christology and soteriology, all of which are closely bound up with one another, to a consideration of the specific issue of baptism. Here he argues from its theological to its historical necessity.

More important to him is establishing infant baptism's theological ground than its explicit practice in the early Church. He seems to be bothered less than Schaff is by Neander's claim that infant baptism was not introduced into general practice until the early third century. Even if that were true, the Baptist's case is by no means established, for the question then arises, "How came such baptism then into quite general use? Was it in full antagonism to the genius of Christianity as it stood before, or did it spring spontaneously out of this, in the way of natural and necessary derivation?"<sup>34</sup> If the unchurchly, the unsacramental, spiritualistic, rationalistic theory of the Baptists had been held by the primitive Church, how could infant baptism have emerged in so short a time?

But Mr. Noel argues that the Church fell also into infant communion before, after centuries of practice, it came universally to be recognized as an abuse. Nevin counters that again on the Baptist sacramental theory one cannot account for how this practice could possibly have come about. One can more easily explain how infant communion, like infant baptism, issued from the genius of Christianity as Nevin has explained it, than how both could emerge out of the Baptist understanding.

In the light of the current debate on infant communion it is interesting to observe that Nevin regards infant communion like transubstantiation as an excess but prefers it to be exclusion altogether of infants from the life of Church just as he no doubt, like Luther would prefer transubstantiation to a

rejection of the real mystical presence of Christ in the Eucharist. I think he would scarcely deny the link in logic between infant baptism and infant communion. The same ecclesiological and sacramental understanding that undergirded his views of infant baptism should move him also to favor infant communion. He is probably held in check here only by the Reformed tradition.

Though Nevin is not as concerned as Schaff to prove the historical argument, he agrees with his colleague against Neander that there probably was infant baptism prior to the third century and he refers to the testimonies of Origen, Tertullian and Cyprian. He argues that since the advocates of infant baptism have the clear testimony of the Fathers in the first half of the third century on their side, the burden of proof lies with the proponents of the Baptist position to show that infant baptism was not practiced before that time especially since Origen for one assumes that it was handed down from Apostolic times.

But lest one think that with his stress upon the objective power of the sacrament he has overlooked its subjective appropriation in faith, Nevin emphasizes near the conclusion of his review that infant baptism is only the beginning of the process of salvation; it assumes catechetical instruction under the hand of the Church and requires confirmation "to bring to its true and full sense." This demand for a personal response on the part of the recipient of baptism should not be regarded as an independent transaction but rather "the natural and suitable close of the baptismal act itself."<sup>35</sup> Here Nevin shows himself aware of the early Church's theology and practice which made the closest connection between baptism and confirmation, a fact which has come to be better understood and appreciated in studies on the subject since World War II.

Schaff likewise insisted upon catechetical instruction and confirmation in which the believer confirms the baptismal vows and makes free and full surrender to God. Thus, he thinks that the baptism of the children of unbelievers, even of professing Christians when there is no likelihood of religious training, is a travesty and a profanation of the sacrament. He objects, however, to the Baptist limitation of faith "to a particular stage of human consciousness" and to their making the dispensation of grace dependent upon it. Like Nevin he argues that the true ground of salvation is not the subjective mind of the creature but the divine compassion. However, he supplements Nevin's view by arguing like Luther and in anticipation of faith development theory that faith itself has "different grades, from the first bud, to the ripe fruit" and that we should therefore think of a level of faith as present already in children.<sup>36</sup>

Nevin concludes his long review article by admitting that there are "great difficulties" which are associated with the subject of baptismal grace. He does not even tell us exactly what these are, much less does he pretend to solve them. Presumably, he has in mind the lack of a faith response in infants and a magical, mechanical view of the sacrament expressed in that well worn phrase about "having the baby done." Nevin does not at all suggest the view of Luther adopted, as we noticed, by Schaff that there is a hidden faith even in infants. In fact, he states that he has stayed clear of the question as to what specifically constitutes the power of baptism in the case of infants. He simply confesses to the belief that grace is objectively present in the sacrament "under some form." That conviction, he thinks, is consonant with the view of Christian antiquity and the Reformation. From that persuasion not only the Baptist viewpoint,

but Crypto-baptist thinking of much of American Protestantism must be distinguished. While acknowledging problems connected with baptismal grace in the case of infants, he thinks the alternative to the <sup>37</sup>assertion of baptismal grace in some sense, even in infants, is rationalism.

The subject<sup>38</sup> of baptismal grace is a major theme of Nevin's essay on Cyprian in 1852. though he does not touch on the question of its precise meaning in infants except to say that Cyprian's view is that baptism is needed by infants who have entered into life with the contagion of the old death from Adam. Over and over again Nevin stresses that for Cyprian baptism is the sacrament of regeneration, "the real ground and foundation of spiritual life." It is a real translation from the sphere of nature, the fallen life of Adam, over into the sphere of truth and grace, the full possibility of righteousness and eternal life, which is revealed in Christ."<sup>39</sup> Note that Nevin says here "the full possibility of righteousness and eternal life." His language is no doubt carefully chosen to guard against the magical view that the fruits of baptism are automatic, that baptism guarantees salvation. He recognizes that human response in faith and obedience is necessary. But if baptism and faith are so indissolubly linked that, unless the baptismal grace is eventually appropriated by faith, it remains ineffectual, it is also correct that there is no true faith which does not yield itself to baptism, in the Church. Making use of the Aristotelian four-fold theory of causes, Nevin holds that in Cyprian's view "the efficient cause of justification is the mercy of God, the meritorious cause, the righteousness of Christ, the instrumental cause, the sacrament of baptism, while what has been called the formal cause is the actual appropriation of this objective grace on the part of the sinner himself."<sup>40</sup>

But Nevin thinks that what is central in the Cyprianic doctrine is not the viewpoint of baptismal regeneration or of the episcopacy separately considered but rather the universal idea of the Church as "a divine constitution built on the foundation of the<sup>41</sup> apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone." This Church though existing in historical form carries in itself actual heavenly and supernatural powers which are dispensed through the sacraments. The notion of the sacrament of baptism as conveying an objective grace is a natural consequence of this theory of the Church, just as those who think of the Church as a human corporation only, will necessarily think of baptism as a mere sign.

On the other hand, it's possible to have a view of baptism that is not far off the mark, and yet not have the correct doctrine of the Church. He acknowledges that Alexander Campbell had a view of baptismal regeneration<sup>42</sup> which recognizes "the notion of an objective power" in the sacrament. Nevin is then correctly aware that Campbell, in contrast with the Baptists with whom Campbell was for a while associated, regarded baptism as more than a mere sign of a regeneration already experienced. Although Campbell is an ardent advocate of believer's baptism, he concurs with Nevin that baptism is a means of grace which is ordained for the remission of sins. In his treatise on Christian Baptism he argues that baptism acts not as an efficient or meritorious but as an instrumental cause "in which faith and repentance are developed and made fruitful and effectual."<sup>43</sup> However, to Nevin, Campbell's view though deserving more respect than the views of some of his critics, is nevertheless defective because it sunders the sacrament of baptism from the living constitution<sup>44</sup> of the Church with which it was originally intimately connected.

This general view of baptism and of its intimate conjunction with the

doctrine of the Church Nevin continues to espouse in articles written in the Mercersburg Review after his retirement from the Seminary and the College and his removal to Lancaster. In an essay, "Thoughts on the Church" in the Mercersburg Review (April, 1858) he states that it is of no use for the Baptist to argue for the obligation of the sacraments against the Quakers, or for the Congregationalist to defend the baptism of infants against the Baptists "without any faith, on either side, in the old doctrine of sacramental grace." Nor can the affirmation of infant baptism or of baptismal grace or of the mystical Presence in the Lord's Supper or of the three orders of ministry make any sense except "in union with the central life of the system to which they belong."<sup>45</sup>

In what was, so far as I can judge, his last substantial word on the subject, he once more sets forth with vigor the "Old Doctrine of Baptism" in the Mercersburg Review (April, 1860). His comments are a reflection on an extract from Chrysostom's Twelfth Homily on the Gospel of Matthew. He stresses that for Chrysostom Christian baptism in contrast to the baptism of John which was in figure and sign only, was a sacrament which brought about remission of sins, regeneration, and adoption for its subjects. The objective presence of grace in the sacraments which effected these benefits is not negated by the continuing presence of sin in those baptized. He points out that for Chrysostom the reality of the heavenly gift of new life conferred by baptism is not overturned by the fact that in thousands of Christians it does not bear fruit. Chrysostom's paranetic discourse does not give the impression that he was at all troubled by a seeming contradiction here. The objective presence of grace in the sacraments belongs to the sphere of faith; it is not to be measured by experimental tests of any kind.

As earlier in his articles on Cyprian, Nevin concludes his essay by comparing "The Old Doctrine of Baptism" with the modern view which rejects the notion that "any external rite...should take away sin, or carry with it the power of regeneration." This modern understanding considers religion to be "an inward spiritual transaction between God and the soul" that may be accompanied by outward forms of worship but is not affected by them in any fundamental way.<sup>46</sup> This modern "self-styled evangelical system" leads logically and ultimately to Quakerism and even to Rationalism, though it generally stops short of those extremes. It is prominently exhibited among the Baptists who stress individualistic conversion of which baptism is the mere profession and outward sign. He does not add what he had said earlier and what he perhaps implies with the publication of this essay, that the movement toward the Baptist persuasion can only be resisted with an adherence to the ancient doctrine of baptism. Nevin confesses at the end that there are difficulties also with this doctrine, but he does not tell us what these are, whereas<sup>47</sup> he does not hesitate to point out the perils of the modern evangelical view.

### Conclusion

In conclusion I make these observations:

1. As in The Mystical Presence, Nevin makes use of his knowledge of history to establish his position, in this case his knowledge of the Fathers, especially Irenaeus, Cyprian, Augustine and Chrysostom. In contrast, however, with The Mystical Presence he makes little use of Calvin and

the Reformed Confessions. Why? Perhaps, because he found Calvin's doctrine of baptism and that of some of the Confessions defective. Nevin knew better than his Reformed detractors, Charles Hodge and Joseph Berg, that Calvin and the Confessions set forth an object grace as conveyed through, or more accurately, with, the sacrament of baptism, but Calvin did not regard the inward grace and the outward sign as so indissolubly united that where there is the one, there is necessarily the other. According to Calvin, God is the one, there is necessarily no other. According to Calvin, God transcends the instruments of which he makes use. He has not so bound himself to the sacrament that he cannot bestow grace without it. Calvin has in mind the case of infants who die before they can be brought to the baptismal font. Nor are all those necessarily saved who are baptized since salvation is dependent on election. There is an unresolved tension in Calvin's thought<sup>48</sup> between his doctrine of sacramental grace and his doctrine of election. Nevin does not refer to the issue of infants who die before being baptized nor does he the matter of election, towards which Calvinistic doctrine he is quite cool, but he seems to advocate a closer union between sign and thing signified than Calvin would allow.

Likewise, Nevin makes relatively little use of Calvin's chief argument for infant baptism, namely the inclusion of all persons in the covenantal community with baptism replacing circumcision as the seal of divine grace and the sign of belonging to that community.

2. Even though he is a champion of infant baptism, Nevin is as critical, if not more so, of the pedobaptist wing of evangelical Protestantism as he is of the Baptist wing. They both exhibit the same anti-sacramental tendencies. The one position is the theological outcome of the other. On the other hand, he shows himself surprisingly sympathetic to Alexander Campbell's doctrine of baptism even though he is an advocate of believer's baptism because his is a sacramental view. I throw that out for what it's worth for the present UCC-Disciples dialogue. Of course, Nevin was sharply critical of Campbell and the Campbelli for what he regarded as their sectarian spirit, a disregard for the Creed, a privatized reading of Scripture, etc.
3. Nevin's writings on the subject emerge for the most part out of a polemical setting. He does not provide us with a systematic, fully rounded out treatment of baptism. He is interested almost exclusively in opposing a spiritualistic, unsacramental and Pelagian view. He stresses the one side of baptism, the divine gift; he gives much less attention to the other side, the human appropriation of that gift in faith and obedience. Nevertheless, he gives some indication that he recognizes the importance of this aspect. Toward the end of his article, "Noel on Baptism" he refers to confirmation, but he does not elaborate on it very much. While he points to the perils of an unsacramental understanding of baptism, he also acknowledges that there are difficulties connected with the sacramental view, but he does not clearly state what these are. One might wish he had done so in the light of the modern ecumenical perception of the dangers of indiscriminate baptisms.
4. In advance of his contemporary champions of infant baptism Nevin recognizes what is now clearly a majority view of scholars, that a sure case for infant baptism cannot be made out of the witness of the New Testament. If a case is to be made for infant baptism, it must arise

out of the theology of the New Testament and the early Church which did not clearly settle into the practice of infant baptism until about 200 A.D. Though less concerned than Schaff to prove the historical argument, he is inclined to agree with his colleague against Neander that infant baptism goes back to apostolic times. But he seems to put little stock in the argument. His position is not far removed from that of Kurt Aland, the contemporary Lutheran scholar, who, while denying that there was infant baptism before about 200 A.D., nevertheless thinks that a strong theological case can be made for it.<sup>49</sup>

As I have already indicated, one might have thought that the same sacramental and ecclesiological considerations which upheld for him the validity of infant baptism, would also support infant or child communion as is being proposed in many circles today.

Finally, as on the Eucharist, so on baptism, John W. Nevin contributed a needed perspective in his time, one which can still stimulate our thinking today as we engage in dialogue on this subject within the United Church of Christ and within the sister denominations of the Reformed family and as we all converse with our ecumenical partners and especially as we consider the Lima statement, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.

# NOTES

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2. Charles Hodge, "Neglect of Infant Baptism," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review 29 (January 1857), 91.
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4. The Mystical Presence, p. 92.
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6. See C. C. Goen, Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).
7. Brooks Holifield, The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England 1570-1720 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 229-30.
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16. Argument for Discourses on Human Nature, in Views of Christian Nurture, pp. 103, 108.
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25. John W. Nevin, The Anxious Bench in Charles Yriogoyen, Jr., and George H. Bricker, Editors. Catholic and Reformed Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin, Pittsburgh Original Texts and Translations Series, No. 3 (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1978), p. 67.
26. Irenaeus, Against Heresies. II. 22; I. 21-23.
27. WM, Vol. 13, No. 25 (March 1, 1848), 2594.
28. John W. Nevin. "Noel on Baptism," Mercersburg Review 2 (1850), 242. Hereafter cited as MR.
29. Ibid., pp. 243-245.
30. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, II. 22.
31. Ibid., pp. 249-250.
32. Philip Schaff, "The Apostolic Origin of Infant Baptism," MR 4 (1852), 390. See also his History of the Apostolic Church (New York; Charles Scribner, 1853), 571-81.
33. Augustus Neander, General History of the Christian Religion and Church (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1854), I, 312. Cited and quoted from the German edition in Schaff, History of the Apostolic Church, p. 573, n. 1. See also his discussion of Tertullian's "On Baptism" in which he reiterates his rejection of an apostolic origin of infant baptism since in this first stage of development "baptism necessarily marked a distinct era in life when a person passed over from a different religious standpoint to Christianity, when the regeneration sealed by baptism presented itself as a principle of moral transformation, in opposition to the earlier development." But Neander goes on to argue that infant baptism developed naturally out of a very different context, "when from the midst of an already existing church-life and of a Christian family-life, the individual life was to be formed in communion with Christ." The time of Tertullian (c. 200 A.D.) marks a period of transition when both types of baptism, believers and infant were vying with one another as is indicated by Tertullian's polemic against infant baptism. History of the Planting and Training of the Christian Church, (London: George Bell, 1880), II, 336-337.
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35. Ibid., p. 263.
36. "Apostolic Origin of Infant Baptism," pp. 392-393.
37. "Noel on Baptism," p. 265.

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## THE MYSTICAL PRESENCE: A SERMON

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*"He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in Him."*  
-John 6:56

I had often wondered why John Williamson Nevin chose to entitle his book on the eucharist The Mystical Presence. Of course I was aware that he probably had John Calvin and his Mystical Union in mind when he did so, but the word mystical has unfortunate overtones in our time, suggesting something spooky, ghostly, not quite real. Then I did something I probably should have done long ago. I looked up the word mystical in my Webster and there I found my answer. Listen: "mystical, having a spiritual meaning, existence or reality, neither apparent to the senses or obvious to the intelligence." Can you think of a better summary of what it was that Nevin was trying to say in his book, a spiritual reality neither apparent to the senses or obvious to the intelligence?

In this centennial year we can be grateful that it was John Nevin who gave the eucharist back to the churches of the Reformed tradition. He did it, of course, by repeating what John Calvin had had to say about it, though he felt it necessary to re-state what the Genevan reformer had said. But whether in Calvin's statement or Nevin's restatement, we need to remember that the mystical presence is a dynamic presence. Much of Christendom wants it to be a thing, one substance in, with and under another. Some of Christendom, especially in Protestantism, wants it to be a memory, a vivid way of remembering Calvary and the atoning death that took place there. It was Calvin's genius, re-enforced by Nevin, that he saw that the Supper was neither a thing or a memory, but an activity, a dynamic activity in which the living Lord comes to share his life with the lives of his people.

*He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in Him.* Notice the emphasis on the action. The emphasis is not on the body and the blood but on eating and drinking them, assimilating the life of Christ into our lives. And I hope that no one thinks that his abiding in us and our abiding in him is a static condition. It is a transforming one. How can Christ abide in us and we in him without having all kinds of changes, all kinds of transformation? If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The bread and the wine are the means by which we grow into that new creation as his life in us gradually replaces the old life with all of its distortion and caricaturing of what human life was made to be.

Yes, but why did Jesus have to choose such a violent metaphor like *eating his flesh and drinking his blood*? I know of so many polite Christians who say that they are offended by it because it sounds so cannibalistic. Why could he not have used something gentler, asking us to believe in him, to be loyal to him -- anything but asking us to eat his flesh and drink his blood? But could anything less than the startling metaphor which our Lord used have conveyed the full reality of what he wanted to say? He wants our life to be part of his life; he wants his life to be assimilated into our lives until we are fully part of that new humanity which he has brought into our being by his death and resurrection. To be part of that new humanity is not just to have some new ideas or some new directions; it is to

share in a completely new life, the life which Henry Scougal once called, "The Life of God in the Soul of Man."

In fact, the very next verse puts it as strongly as possible. "*He who eats me will live because of me.*" To reason or intelligence, we are all living as it is, thank you. But that is an illusion. We are all existing, an existence which we share with the whole animal creation. We have existence by nature, but if we want life, real life, abundant life, that we can find only as Christ lives in us and we in him. That new life began in us when he received us in holy baptism. But now by the eucharist it is nourished and strengthened in us as we are being changed into his likeness, from glory to glory advancing.

I sometimes enjoy Calvin's ambiguity about the mystical presence. Sometimes he speaks as though that presence comes down to us and is by the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst here. At other times he speaks as though, by the power of that same Spirit, we are all lifted up where Christ is in the heavenly places, there to share in his life-giving presence. Because this is a mystical presence, I like to think that both of these can happen at once; he is here where we are and we are there where he is, because we abide in him and he in us.

But the spiritual geography does not really matter. What matters is the spiritual reality, that he lives in us and we live in him. That's the transforming experience. We are part of him and he is part of us, using his redeeming power to make us over into the new men and women he gave his life on the cross to create. Every day I am more convinced than ever that our world needs to hear the gospel of Mercersburg. The evangelical world today places such an enormous emphasis on getting people born again, however it may conceive that that is done. But once they are born again, they are left as spiritual infants or it is supposed that we grow up into the fullness of the stature of Christ in a single stroke. The result is that the church today is filled with spiritual babies when there never was a more urgent need for mature men and women in Christ.

I mention this because it is a common canard to accuse the Mercersburg Society of being antiquarian, having no concern with the pains and the problems of today's world. Well, if we spent all our time trying to analyze the sources of Nevin's writings or seeking to discover what were the principle influences in his thought, that might be true. But the crucial importance of the sacraments in the life of Reformed churches today is hardly an antiquarian question or if it is, we are in need of a healthy dose of antiquarianism. Especially considering the ecumenical situation in which we now live and the rampages of a highly individualized evangelicalism in American life, to say nothing of the feeble ways in which we try to make a Christian impact on our world, when have we ever had a greater need for mature Christians to represent and act out the new humanity into which Christ has incorporated us?

No, we have not met here as a group of antiquarians but as a company of concerned Christians, concerned to know how we can more effectively develop the new humanity in the old world, the ideal church within the actual one with which we are all too familiar. We have not come because we believe that Mercersburg has all the answers, but because we are confident that it points in the right direction, the direction in which the church must go if it is to fulfill its calling as the body of Christ.

To the world outside what we are doing tonight seems to have little to do with the case. In Webster's words it is neither apparent to the senses or obvious to the intelligence. Even to many of our congregations, there would seem to be more significant things for us to be doing than taking a bit of bread and a swallow of wine. Why not mount some kind of demonstration or organize some kind of protest? That would at least be doing something in a world that desperately needs to have something done!

Well, we are doing something in a world that desperately needs to have something done, something with a dimension that will last long after all of our protests and demonstrations have been forgotten. In taking this bit of bread and this swallow of wine, we are renewing and deepening his life in us and our life in him and we do this not for our own sakes but for the sake of the world which he came to save. We are fully aware that the needs of that world are such that our own strength and ideas are abysmally inadequate for them. But we are also aware that in joining our lives to his, we are joining ourselves to One who has already overcome the world. The mystical presence becomes the victorious presence in which we can do all things. This is the Christ who has promised to share himself with us, not the humble man of Galilee or even the crucified Savior, but the living, conquering king with all power in his hands. It is his voice that cries to us tonight, *He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.*

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**June 8 and 9, 1987**

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The Society holds an annual Convocation. Proceedings of the Convocation are published in The New Mercersburg Review, a theological journal.

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